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# Before You Read...

Hi everyone!

For those who may have enjoyed Warriors #1: Kittypet Clanborn, this is the sequel right here! I hope you like it as much as the first one!

***DISCLAIMER*** This book has been SIGNIFICANTLY edited and rewritten since I first released it, so I'm sorry if you look at the comments and you are utterly confused!

- warriorcatlover345

# Chapter 1

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Lilypetal! Lilypetal! Lilypetal!"

I opened my eyes quickly to see Goldenkit standing just a mouselength in front of my face, hopping.

"Goldenkit? What's going on?" I asked as I stood up, shaking out my fur. *I'm asking as if Goldenkit* doesn't *wake me up like this every morning...*

"Whitewing has kitted!" Snowkit suddenly stuck her small head into the nursery, her pale blue eyes wide with excitement.

Then, without another word, Snowkit and Goldenkit both let out a squeal before bursting out of the nursery and padding through the camp clearing, towards the medicine den. I watched them go, a purr rumbling in my throat.

Goldenkit and Snowkit were my two precious kits, who I had had with my amazing mate, Thornclaw. They brought me more happiness then I could have ever thought possible. Every action they made, every meow they let come out of their mouths made my heart melt.

As of now, they were past five moons old. Which meant, to my dismay, that they would be apprentices soon. Every time that that realization came to mind, I would have to push it away immediately, because sometimes it was too much to bear. As ecstatic as I was to see my kits learn the ways of a warrior, a huge part of me would miss having them here in the nursery, curled up close to me as we slept together every night.

I shook my head quickly as I delved into these thoughts. I decided that I should finally follow Snowkit and Goldenkit out of the

nursery so that I could see Whitewing and her new kits. *Lucky her, she has six whole moons with her kits ahead of her!*

As I traveled through the ThunderClan camp, I tried to think more positively. *While Goldenkit and Snowkit are away training and out of the nursery, you're going to get to be a warrior again, for StarClan's sake!* I told myself. *I have to say, nothing beats hunting out in the forest or fighting in battle.*

I did hate to admit it sometimes, but I was quite eager to return to being a warrior again after being a queen. I had already wasted so much of my life being cooped up in a Twoleg den as a kittypet, and joining ThunderClan was definitively the best decision I had ever made in my life. Almost as soon as I had walked into the camp with Squirrelflight, Brambleclaw, Sandstorm, Spiderleg and Graystripe for the first time, I had realized that Clan life had been calling me for so long, and I had finally answered the calling.

What made the arrival to ThunderClan even more monumental was the fact that just days after I arrived, my long lost mother, Mistpelt, was found by Thornclaw and me on one of our hunting trips. I had found out that Mistpelt was a *ThunderClan cat* herself, and that I was Clanborn. It had made me realize all the more that I was where I was meant to be.

Since being in the Clans, I had also trained to become a warrior, received my warrior name, fought in my first battle, made friends I would fight to the death for, fallen in love, had kits who were perfection in my eyes, and found my *something*... my *more* in life. *This*, I thought to myself. *This right here.*

Realizing that I had gone so deeply into my thoughts that I had nearly stopped in my tracks, I pulled myself back into reality and trotted happily over to the medicine den. I let out a purr of amusement as I realized that Goldenkit and Snowkit had waited for me, and were standing right outside of the medicine den entrance, both of their eyes wide open and glowing with eagerness.

"Took you long enough!" Goldenkit exclaimed before whipping herself around to pad inside. "Come on!"

Before I could follow my daughter, I felt Snowkit lightly touch me on the shoulder with her fluffy tail. I looked down to see that see was looking up at me, her eyes filled with guilt.

"We were fine waiting," she assured me, her eyes then hopeful.

I let out a soft purr before touching Snowkit's ear with my nose. "I know, that's alright," I whispered to her before beckoning her to walk with me into the medicine den. *She has such a big heart,* I thought fondly before letting my gaze follow Goldenkit as she ran excitedly around in circles in the medicine den.

I sniffed. *Goldenkit definitely does too, she just has a very different way of showing it!*

I averted my attention to the center of the medicine den, where Whitewing was lying with two little kits suckling at her belly. I couldn't help but purr as I watched the white queen look lovingly down at her two new daughters. *I'm so happy for her. She's going to be a fantastic mother.*

I finally spoke, still staring down at the two little balls of fur. "They're beautiful, Whitewing," I purred. "What did you name them?"

"Aren't they? They're so perfect," Whitewing meowed softly, her eyes not moving away from her kits. "The gray one is Dovekit. And the gray and white tabby is Ivykit."

I had nodded as the white she-cat spoke. "Those are wonderful names," I responded. I then thought that I would give some advice to the new mother, taking my thoughts from earlier. I leaned in closer to Whitewing before whispering, "Take advantage of every moment you have with them. It'll seem like it's over before you can say 'Goldenkit's got stinky breath'!"

"Hey!" I heard Goldenkit exclaim from behind me.

Whitewing let out a *mrrow* of laughter before mewing, "I definitely am going to try, Lilypetal. Thank you for coming to see me!"

I dipped my head to Whitewing. "It was my pleasure," I meowed.

"*Please* come to me if you need any help!"

"Will do!" I heard Whitewing call back as I turned around and began to lead Snowkit and Goldenkit out of the medicine den.

As we were traveling back to the nursery, I passed Birchfall, the father of Whitewing's new kits. When he caught me in his gaze, he turned around from where he'd been pacing, a desperate look in his eyes.

"I heard Whitewing has kitted. Are she and the kits okay?" he almost shouted. "Of course I had to be on patrol when it happened."

I nodded and couldn't suppress a purr of amusement. "Yes. They're perfect, Birchfall," I assured him as I flicked my tail towards the medicine den. "They're all waiting for you in there!"

The pale tabby tom gave me a quick nod before whipping around and pelting over to the medicine den, his tail high in the air.

I watched him go. *Not only is Whitewing going to be a great mother, but Birchfall is going to be a great father,* I thought. *Whitewing chose well.*

I still remembered Whitewing telling me all about how she had feelings for him, but wasn't sure if he liked her back. *I practically squealed when she told me that they were finally mates!*

Finally, I crawled back into the nursery with Snowkit and Goldenkit following. I nearly jumped up when suddenly I heard Snowkit yelp, and I turned around to see that Goldenkit had leaped on her sister, beginning one of their usual play-fighting games.

I lied down and got comfortable in our moss nest, purring as I watched the two of them. They were no fighters yet, but there was determination in their blue and gray eyes as they batted at each other with their paws.

*They aren't even apprentices yet, and I'm already so proud of them,* I thought. *They're going to turn into great warriors someday.*

# Chapter 2

[image]

***Goldenkit's POV***

After Snowkit and I's play-fighting session, I had grabbed a scrawny mouse from the fresh-kill pile and dragged it over to the nursery for us to play with. But Lilypetal made us get rid of it when it got dirty.

Now, I was bored, so I decided to walk around the ThunderClan camp with Snowkit.

The camp blew me away every I got to look at it. It was so *big*! Looking around made me feel like the scrawny mouse that I had just been playing with.

But I *certainly* didn't let that get to *me*! I knew that I could handle walking around a camp so big. *I'm almost an apprentice!* I thought. *I could walk from here to the old territory and back all on my own! Thornclaw and Lilypetal probably wouldn't let me do that though...*

As Snowkit and I began to pad through camp, side by side, I suddenly paused as I saw cats emerge from the camp entrance.

I watched them, tilting my head to the side in curiosity. "Where've *they* been?" I wondered out loud.

Snowkit, who had stopped to sit beside me, answered. "That's a border patrol!" She meowed. "They go around ThunderClan territory to see if there are any cats from others Clans who are intruding."

I let out a huff at my sister's answer, feeling very annoyed out of nowhere. I didn't like to admit it, but out of me and Snowkit, I feel like other cats would say that she was definitely the smartest. I couldn't help feeling a small pang of jealousy just now as she confidently answered my question. *She could become a warrior right now and know exactly the things she had to do!* I realized before

snorting. *It's probably because she sits around for so long just observing things. How can she sit still for so long?*

I then rolled my eyes. *I suppose that she's getting something out of it if she knows more about being a warrior than I do...*

I tried my hardest to push my envy down as I watched the patrol, as Snowkit had explained to me, walk up to Firestar, the ThunderClan leader.

"Anything to report?" he asked the patrol, leaping down from the tall Highledge.

Brambleclaw, the ThunderClan deputy, stepped forward from the group. "Nothing's wrong..." he answered warily. "But we thought that we maybe scented WindClan close to the border by the stream."

I couldn't help but gasp. *WindClan! Were there intruders?*

Firestar didn't look surprised. "Were they fresh?"

Brambleclaw exchanged a glance with Cloudtail, who was just behind him. "No... the scent was fairly stale. Should we keep an eye on it?"

Firestar dipped his head. "I'll send out another border patrol before moonhigh tonight so we can put more scent markers down," he murmured. "I am not risking another battle as brutal as the last one."

Snowkit and I exchanged a nervous look as Firestar mentioned the eclipse battle. Lilypetal had told me all about how WindClan had ambushed them in the middle of the night. Onestar had claimed that he'd attacked because he disapproved of Firestar's leadership, and said that he didn't care about his Clan in the way that Onestar did. He had also criticized Firestar for letting in rogues, kittypets and loners often.

It had made me angry when my mother told me that. *I may have a mother that used to be a kittypet, but she is an amazing warrior, anyway!* I thought proudly.

This battle between WindClan and ThunderClan had eventually turned into a battle between all the Clans. Lilypetal had then explained with her hazel eyes wide that the battle had been cut off when the sun was covered up by a big black hole, as if night had fallen way too early.

I had also snorted in amusement as she'd told me she'd collapsed in exhaustion, because she had pushed herself too much to fight all she could.

I found myself lifting my head up in pride as I thought, *when I fight in battle, I'll fight as long as it takes, and never get tired!* I pricked my ears up with excitement. *I wish I could fight in battles. I wish I could be a warrior!*

"Hey, Goldenkit!"

I shook my head quickly as I realized that Snowkit was slowly waving her paw in front of my face.

"Yeah?" I mewed, pulling myself back into my surroundings. I quickly peered past her to see that the border patrol who had been talking to Firestar had dispersed.

"Do you want to maybe pay a visit to Mousefur, Longtail and Purdy?" My sister asked, tilting her head. "Maybe they'll be in a good enough mood to answer your endless questions!"

I rolled my eyes, lightly pawing Snowkit's shoulder. "Or in a good enough mood to be able to handle that annoying captivating stare you give them whenever they are telling a story."

"Great StarClan," Snowkit muttered, following me as I began to trot over to the elders den. "But really though, you ask so many questions, I'd be shocked if you couldn't tell me the story of origins of all of the Clans and then up until now without missing a detail!"

My ears pricked at Snowkit's words. "Really? But what about *you*?" I asked Snowkit bitterly. "You're so smart!"

Snowkit paused for a moment, her head whipping around so that she could meet my gaze. "Don't be silly, Goldenkit!" Snowkit

insisted. "I do watch what happens in the Clan all of the time, but that's not the only way a kit learns!"

As the two of us began to pad on, Snowkit went on. "How can you go on about me being *smart* when you're so outgoing? I could never go up and just ask a cat here about something I was curious about. Too scary for me!"

I let out a sigh as I realized that Snowkit's praise truly made me feel better. *Lilypetal has pointed out to us so many times how different Snowkit and I are,* I thought. *We both have our different strengths, but that makes us who we are!*

I lifted my head up with pride once again. *Who cares if Snowkit knows some fast facts that I don't?* I asked myself. *I'm going to be an awesome warrior no matter what!*

Snowkit and I exchanged a warm glance as we continued to walk. *We are really, really different,* I began to conclude. *But that's one reason why we get along so well!*

A wave of affection flowing through me, I briefly nuzzled my sister's neck fur with my muzzle. *I can't wait for us to be apprentices beside each other, and then warriors!* I realized excitedly. *Things are so great when we can do them together!*

# Chapter 3

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Lilypetal, are you okay?"

I lifted my head from my paws to see that Thornclaw was padding into the nursery, his pale blue eyes glowing with concern. The sun almost seemed to create an orb around him as it began to set in the sky behind him.

The sight of my mate was already seeming to ease the worrisome thoughts I had just been having before he arrived into the den. *Obviously he can see that something's bothering me,* I realized.

Before I could answer Thornclaw's question, I was interrupted by the squeals of my daughters behind me.

"Father!" Snowkit and Goldenkit exclaimed before running up to the golden tabby tom. Goldenkit grabbed onto his tail with her teeth while Snowkit hopped all around him, her eyes gleaming with excitement. Even though the two of them had almost just gotten back from a long walk around the camp, their energy was far from gone.

Thornclaw purred in happiness. "Goldenkit, that's not a stick, it's my tail," he purred softly as Goldenkit continued to latch onto his tail.

"So what?" Goldenkit meowed, her mouth full of Thornclaw's tail fur.

I purred with amusement as Thornclaw then teased, "You're getting bigger each day! Soon enough, hanging onto my tail might just snap it off!"

Goldenkit quickly let go of her father's tail and let out a *mrrow* of high-pitched laughter as she rolled around on the soft earth.

"Imagine that!" Snowkit purred. "Telling Leafpool and Jayfeather that you need their help because Goldenkit broke your tail off!"

"They'd probably say that I had strong teeth!" Goldenkit squeaked, barring her teeth.

"Yes, because *that* is what you should get out of that experience," Thornclaw purred, touching both kits on their heads with his nose. He glanced at me briefly before turning back to Snowkit and Goldenkit, meowing, "I think I saw Blossomkit, Bumblekit and Briarkit playing mossball outside. How about you two join them while Lilypetal and I talk?"

Goldenkit nodded quickly. "Okay!"

"We'll join them!" Snowkit exclaimed.

As the two kits then turned around to trot out of the den, I called out to them, "Don't stay out playing too late! I'll come out to get you when it's time to go to sleep!"

I then let out a sigh as the excited squeals of Goldenkit and Snowkit faded, and Thornclaw padded up to sit beside me in our nest.

"So," Thornclaw began, lightly nudging me on the shoulder, "tell me why those beautiful hazel eyes of yours look so worried."

I immediately hesitated, not sure how much I should share with Thornclaw about what was bugging me. "Well... so..." I stammered.

"You certainly don't have to tell me," Thornclaw insisted, pressing his muzzle to my cheek. "I just know that you typically tell me what's bothering you, which is what worries me."

I met Thornclaw's warm blue gaze, and I felt my heart well up with love, just seeing how truly concerned my mate was for me.

I sighed again, trying to collect myself and get my words together. *Thornclaw's right,* I realized. *I do tell him everything. As much as it may make him freak out, he deserves to know.* Letting out an exasperated huff, I then thought, *and I've been hiding it for too long in the hopes that it might get better, but it hasn't.*

Hiding the fact that Ashfur was still lingering through the ThunderClan forest had been quite tough. The crazy mouse-brain, I suppose, still hadn't let go of the grudges he held, and felt like something would happen if he stayed in his old territory? I still wasn't really sure.

I hadn't told any cat that this was happening. I truly had hoped that if I just waited it out, Ashfur would give up and vanish like any other exile would. But, just moments ago, I had been stressing about the fact that that probably hadn't been the best idea. And that was why Thornclaw had immediately noticed something was off as he walked into the nursery.

Up until now, I had been able to ignore it all somewhat. During the day, life was peaceful, but almost as soon as I settled into my nest for the night, I could hear Ashfur's footsteps through the forest, and clearly catch a whiff of his scent. I hadn't gotten many good nights of sleep lately. Rather, I would lie in my nest with Thornclaw, Snowkit and Goldenkit, and while they slept, I would keep my head up, my ears alert for any signs of danger.

This had been happening for two moons now, which also marked two moons since Ashfur had been exposed for who he really was at the Gathering, and was exiled from ThunderClan. *I wonder if Squirrelflight has noticed him too?* I thought. *As horrible as it would be for Ashfur to go after both of the cats that exposed him, I would like to know that I'm not exactly alone.*

I then told myself that now that I was telling Thornclaw, I wouldn't be alone. I was two moons too late to be telling any cat, I knew that *now*, but I already felt a little better knowing that I was getting it out.

I took a deep breath and looked into Thornclaw's pale blue eyes. *I hope that he's not angry that I waited a bit to tell him...*

"Ashfur is still in ThunderClan territory," I told him evenly, immediately trying to read his gaze after I spoke.

My mate's eyes immediately widened.

"*What?!*" He exclaimed, standing up. "Are you sure?"

I stood up too, nodding. "I'm sure," I meowed. "He comes around every few nights, and sometimes I can hear him behind the nursery."

As I feared he would, Thornclaw then asked, "Why haven't you said anything before?"

I shook my head slowly. "I asked myself that as soon as you walked into the den!" I admitted. "I figured that if I gave it some time, the mouse-brain would just leave."

Thornclaw then let out a sigh, I assumed to try and calm himself down. "I understand that," he muttered, touching his nose to mine. "And I have to admit, I've been woken up lately by some rustles I thought that I heard, but I've just brushed them off."

*Thank StarClan*, I thought to myself. *That makes me feel a little better.*

I managed to let out a faint purr of amusement. "Okay, so we're both idiots," I teased, nudging Thornclaw lightly.

Thornclaw gave me an affectionate look before shaking his head quickly, almost as if to bring himself back into business. "Have you actually seen him?" He asked.

A pang of fear shot through my stomach as I was brought back to the morning after the Gathering, when I had first heard noises from behind the nursery. I had snuck out of camp briefly to see what was going on, and traveled through the dirtplace trail to find Ashfur's speckled-gray fur nearby. He had disappeared out of *sight* since then, but certainly not in scent.

I nodded to Thornclaw again and briefly described the morning that I had discovered Ashfur out in the ThunderClan forest. Thornclaw listened intently, his eyes still wide with alarm.

As soon as I was done with the explanation, I flicked my ears as Thornclaw ran past me and out of the nursery. "Well, this is something Firestar should know!" he called back to me. "I'm not risking you, my kits, or anyone else in this Clan falling back into

danger because of that fox-heart!"

For a moment, I just stood in awe, satisfied at how well that conversation had gone, before I saw Thornclaw's head pop back into the nursery.

"You coming, Lilypetal?" he meowed, tilting his head. "You're going to be doing most of the talking. I'm just there for support!"

I purred with amusement once again. Thornclaw could be so adorable, and he didn't even realize it most of the time. "Yes, I'm coming," I purred before following my mate out of the nursery.

Almost immediately, I paused again as my gaze fell on Goldenkit and Snowkit, who luckily were playing with Millie's kits as Thornclaw had told them to do.

"What about the kits?" I called to Thornclaw.

As Thornclaw paused as well and was about to give me an answer, I noticed that Goldenkit had separated herself from the mossball game and was padding over to stand in front of me.

"Don't worry, Lilypetal!" She insisted. "We can be good!"

"Yeah!" Snowkit meowed, joining her sister. "You don't need to worry!"

I exchanged a wary glance with Thornclaw. "They are going to be apprentices soon," I realized out loud.

"I suppose that it is about time that they learn to be on their own for a few moments," Thornclaw murmured, briefly glancing sadly at his two daughters. *He's probably just as sad as I am to watch our daughters grow up*, I thought.

My mate and I then exchanged another glance, almost as if coming to a silent agreement.

"Okay, you two," Thornclaw meowed to Snowkit and Goldenkit, his gaze serious. "We're going to trust you to stay here without us for a little bit."

Both Snowkit and Goldenkit's mouths dropped in astonishment. Goldenkit then began to jump up and down.

"You trust us? You *trust* us!" Goldenkit exclaimed, before seemingly calming herself down. She then lifted her head up as she meowed. "And you have every reason to!"

Snowkit nodded in agreement. "Definitely!"

"I know I do," I meowed softly to my kits before continuing to travel over to Firestar's den with Thornclaw. "*Please* behave! Stay with the other queens!"

As soon as I caught up to Thornclaw, we began to walk to the Highledge to leap up and into to the ThunderClan leader's den to share our news.

# Chapter 4

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"-and then he ran off into the forest," I finished. "Since then, I've only heard him and scented him."

As soon as Thornclaw and I had arrived in Firestar's den, we had told him about Ashfur. I had explained exactly what I'd seen as Firestar listened with his emerald eyes narrowed.

"So, what do you think?" Thornclaw asked the ThunderClan leader as soon as I had finished.

Firestar looked thoughtful for a few heartbeats.

"Well, first off, I definitely have to say that that's not a surprise to me," Firestar murmured. "Exiled cats don't typically let go that easily." I raised my eyebrows as a quick shudder ran down the leader's spine.

I flicked my ears as I realized who Firestar was probably thinking about. When Bluestar had exiled Tigerstar in ThunderClan, back in the old forest, the determined dark brown tabby tom still tried to take down his former Clan. He had sent out a pack of dogs in an attempt to bring harm to any cat possible, and he had even teamed up with BloodClan, rogues from the Twolegplace, to take over the forest.

*Even though Ashfur hasn't necessarily killed any cat yet, he has tried to,* I thought. *As much as I would like to hope that he wouldn't ever go as far as Tigerstar did, I can't settle with that.*

Suddenly feeling the strong urge to get this cat out of the forest, I began kneading my paws on the ground as I asked Firestar, "Should Thornclaw and I go out into ThunderClan territory to try and find him?"

Firestar's eyes flashed with alarm. I already knew what he was about to ask.

"Millie is with the kits," I reassured Firestar. As much as I would prefer that another warrior go out to look for Ashfur in my place, I felt like the message wouldn't get through as much if I wasn't there. *I managed to intimidate Ashfur at the Gathering. I'll certainly try again.*

Luckily, Firestar seemed to be thinking like I was. "I suppose I'll have to trust your judgment, Lilypetal," he meowed. "I let you go to that Gathering, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did!" I agreed, determination surging into my bones.

"But do *I* want to trust your judgment, though?" Thornclaw retorted beside me. "We've seen the kinds of grudges that Ashfur can hold, and what he does about them!"

At Thornclaw's words, I glanced sympathetically over at Firestar as I remembered one of Ashfur's attempts at revenge against Squirrelflight. *He helped Hawkfrost in trying to trap Firestar in a foxtrap. He was the one to lead him away from camp,* I recalled. *He claimed that* that *would match up to his pain he felt for Squirrelflight rejecting him. How outrageous is that?*

Thornclaw interrupted my thoughts again. He starred at me, his eyes filled with worry. "I don't know what I'd do if I sent you out into danger like that when I didn't have to," he meowed, his voice shaking just a little bit.

I put my tail tip on Thornclaw's shoulder as my heart welled up with love. "But I do have to," I insisted. "And you'll be there to protect me." I then shook my head quickly, realizing that all of Thornclaw's words to me applied to him also. "But I don't want to bring *you* out into danger. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

Thornclaw's eyes glittered with admiration and apprehension. "In situations like this, there's just no fighting you, is there?" He whispered, touching his nose to mine. "And don't be ridiculous. I'm coming with you."

As Thornclaw pulled away, I gave him a warm look for just a heartbeat before turning back to Firestar. "We'll take care of Ashfur for you," I meowed definitively, giving the leader a sharp nod.

Firestar dipped his head. "Very well," he agreed, still looking a little wary. "You two may go out into the forest and look for Ashfur. But..."

I tilted my head.

"But," Firestar continued, "If you aren't back by moonhigh, I will send Brambleclaw out with backup."

"Sounds good," I meowed, nodding to Firestar. *But hopefully that won't be needed. If Ashfur is the kind of cat that needs extra backup in order to be chased out, then he's more dangerous that I could ever imagine!*

"Should we kill him when we see him?" Thornclaw asked, his claws unsheathing onto the ground.

Firestar lashed his tail as he shook his head. "He's just going to be treated like any normal intruder," Firestar answered. "If you see him, chase him out. Nothing more." He then turned to let his gaze burn into Thornclaw's. "*No killing*," His voice was sharp.

I couldn't help but purr with amusement as Thornclaw's more... *aggressive* side began to come out right in front of me. Thornclaw wasn't a vicious cat by *any* means, but I knew that out of protectiveness or in defense of his Clan, he would be tempted to become as such in order to keep those he loved safe.

He seemed to be pushing his temptations down, nodding to Firestar and muttering, "Will do, Firestar."

I then stood up, realizing that I was ready to go. "We'll chase away that mouse-brain for you, Firestar!" I declared. "He'll never even think about setting a paw in this territory again."

Thornclaw stood up as well, his narrowed eyes glowing with persistence. "Oh-ho-ho, I would *love* to see him try!" He agreed before turning around and beginning to pad out of the den. "Let's

go!"

Before following my mate, I turned back to Firestar. "We'll make sure that that tom never brings any more harm to you or your kin, Firestar," I meowed, reassuring the ThunderClan leader.

Firestar dipped his head. "Thank you, Lilypetal," he meowed back. "ThunderClan honors your courage."

I dipped my head back to the ginger tom before finally following Thornclaw out of the den and leaping down from the Highledge.

As I trotted over to Thornclaw, who was waiting by the camp entrance already, I looked up to the sky. The sun was gone from sight, and the sky was beginning to fill up with warrior ancestors as the red and pink was replaced with dark navy.

"Lilypetal, are you sure that you want to come?" Thornclaw asked me as I walked up to meet him. "You can stay here while I go out and find Ashfur myself!"

I shook my head slowly as Thornclaw spoke. I then pressed my muzzle against his. "I'm not leaving you to shred Ashfur to bits," I insisted to my mate. "Either *I'm* coming with *you*, or *you're* staying here!"

Thornclaw didn't pull away immediately, a purr rumbling in his throat. "Fine. We're doing this together then," he whispered.

As the two of us pulled our muzzles away, I was overwhelmed with love and gratitude for my mate. *This cat would walk the entire circle of the earth with me if I asked him to,* I thought. *Every day I wonder how I got so lucky.*

"Let's go," I whispered back to Thornclaw, touching my nose to his before running through the camp entrance and out into the forest.

I paused as I waiting for Thornclaw to catch up. We exchanged a glance that was a mix of determination, fear, and anticipation as we began to walk side by side deeper into ThunderClan's territory.

*Here the two of us are, out venturing into the forest again!* I thought

excitedly as I began to search for Ashfur's scent.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To my luck, it didn't take long at all to find Ashfur's stench. I had almost instantly caught it.

I narrowed my eyes as I tried to push down the apprehension that was welling up inside of me. "I've found his scent!" I hissed to Thornclaw, who had been sniffing over at some brambles. He met my gaze, his eyes a mix of anger and alarm, before padding over to meet me.

I watched as he then gaped open his mouth to take in the odor. "Yep, that's it," he muttered. "The perfect mix of ThunderClan scent and madness."

After letting out a hushed purr of amusement at Thornclaw's comment, I bent my head down to begin tracking the smell. As I did so, my stomach twisted as I realized something.

*This stench is completely fresh.*

I heard Thornclaw hiss from right behind me, and I turned my head to see that his eyes were narrowed. "We're practically following right behind him," Thornclaw muttered, repeating my thoughts.

Just as I was about to respond, I gasped and lifted my head as a sound came from a group of bushes just a couple of foxlengths away. I exchanged a nervous glance with Thornclaw, though I saw him unsheathing his claws from the bottom of my vision.

I then found myself leaping in front of my mate, to shield him, I suppose, as another rustle came from another set of bushes, these even closer.

Then, another fresh Ashfur scent flooded through my nose. Not the fresh one from the trail, but a scent as fresh as fresh could get.

Sure enough, the speckled-gray head then emerged out of the brambles to face me.

# Chapter 5

[image]

***Goldenkit's POV***

"Wow, Lilypetal and Thornclaw haven't been back for a long time," Snowkit mewed. She was standing at the nursery entrance, staring up at the stars.

I barely heard her, as I was playing a game of mossball with Ivykit and Dovekit.

"What was that?" I asked Snowkit after tossing the mossball over to Ivypaw.

Snowkit groaned and padded over to me. "I *said* mother and father haven't come back in a long time," she repeated, sounding annoyed. "I'm surprised you aren't worried yourself!"

I flicked my ears. She was right. Lilypetal and Thornclaw had told us they were leaving camp at around dusk, and now it was approaching nighttime and they *still* weren't back. "Yeah...," I murmured, nodding to Snowkit in agreement. *I wonder where they even went? Why have they had to be gone this long?*

I decided to walk over to Millie, who was the first older cat that caught my sight. *Maybe Lilypetal or Thornclaw told one of the older cats where they were going!*

I lightly touched Millie's silver tabby flank with my paw. "When are Lilypetal and Thornclaw coming back?" I asked her.

I realized too late that Millie had been trying to sleep.

She shot up her head quickly. Her eyes were heavy, but blazing. "How am I supposed to know? Stop badgering me and leave me alone!" She hissed before putting her head back down irritably.

I sniffed and flattened my ears. *Well, that definitely didn't make me*

*feel any better about things...*

I sat where I was for a few heartbeats, feeling dejected, when suddenly I felt a soft tail run itself down my flank, and I looked up to see Whitewing, her soft blue gaze looking down at me.

"Millie is just tired, Goldenkit. She didn't mean that at all," she assured me, touching her nose to my ear. "And don't worry, I'm sure that your parents will be back soon."

I couldn't help but let out a purr at the queen's kind words. "Thanks, Whitewing," I mewed, briefly nuzzling my head along her flank before the white she-cat padded back over to watch her two daughters.

I sighed as I watched her go, my sadness not going away just yet. The calmness of her meow made me miss Lilypetal, along with her kind voice and her sweet scent. She had been such an amazing mother to Snowkit and me. She was so gentle, she told us great stories, and she usually let us play when we wanted to. So, I was so confused as to why she suddenly just had to *leave*, not being able to give us an explanation.

I tried to push down waves of emotion as I walked back to my nest. *Lilypetal, where are you?*

Almost immediately after I settled myself in, Snowkit came over and sat beside me.

"Are you alright?" My sister asked, her blue eyes shining as they reflected against the moonlight outside.

I closed my eyes, fighting back emotion once again. "I miss Lilypetal!" I whimpered. "Why is she suddenly so busy?"

Snowkit sighed as she pressed her flank against mine. "Thornclaw and Lilypetal *did* tell us that they'd be leaving for a little while," she reminded me. "They'll probably be home soon!"

*But what about now? I want Lilypetal and Thornclaw home* now*!*

I took a deep breath, opened my eyes and lifted up my head, trying

to be assured by my sister's words. "I guess you're right," I murmured, nudging Snowkit on the shoulder lightly. "Thanks."

"Sure!" Snowkit purred. I then watched my sister as she returned to her spot in front of the nursery entrance, sitting down as she began to look back up at the stars. I let out a quiet *humph*, wondering what I could do with myself while I waited for my parents to return home.

*Maybe I'll try and go to sleep, and while Snowkit is looking outside, she'll be able to wake me up if she sees Thornclaw or Lilypetal!* I told myself as I lied down in my nest and tried to get comfortable.

But, almost immediately after I had closed my eyes, they shot back open again as an idea popped in my head.

I stood up quickly and padded up to the nursery entrance where Snowkit was. I tapped her on the shoulder with my tail.

She let out a small squeak, startled, before turning around to face me with her eyes wide.

"Great StarClan, Goldenkit. You scared me out of my fur!" My sister exclaimed. "Was that necessary?"

I narrowed my eyes, a smirk emerging on my face. "Yes, it was," I whispered before beckoning Snowkit with my tail to follow me to the corner of the nursery where I knew that no cat could hear.

"What now?" Snowkit whispered, rolling her eyes.

*Hey, be a little meaner, why don't you?* I thought. As notorious Snowkit was for being gentle and kind, I knew very well by now that sometimes my shenanigans brought her to her worst.

But this time, I *knew* that I was on to something!

I kneaded my paws into the ground excitedly. "Let's go on an adventure and find mother and father!"

Snowkit's eyes widened and she flicked her ears. I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as she began to back away slowly, shaking her head.

"Goldenkit, are you mouse-brained? Kits aren't allowed to leave camp. We could get in *big* trouble!"

I shook my head. Snowkit just *had* to do this with me. "No cat will find out!" I insisted. "Besides, wouldn't we be *heroes* if we found them? We would be the best warriors ever!" I lifted up my chest.

"Do cats become warriors by breaking the rules?" Snowkit hissed quietly. "Certainly not, the last time that I checked!"

"Snowkit, come on!" I continued to urge as I jumped up and down. "What could Lilypetal and Thornclaw possibly have to say against us if we find them?"

"Hm..." I rolled my eyes as Snowkit pretended to ponder. "Possibly, 'you two are kits and aren't allowed to leave camp'?"

I let out an annoyed groan. Why was Snowkit being so difficult? Couldn't she understand how far ahead that doing something like this would get the two of us?

I mean, doing heroic things is what makes warriors... well, warriors! I knew that if Snowkit and I escaped the camp and found our parents that had been missing, even Firestar would only have nice things to say!

"But what if our parents were in danger?" I questioned Snowkit. "Wouldn't you escape the camp to find them then?"

I narrowed my eyes as I saw Snowkit hesitate. "I mean," she stammered, "I... I guess I would."

*Yes! Yes!* "So, what if mother and father were in danger right now?" I asked my sister, trying to ignore my own worries. *They really could be in danger!* I realized. *We definitely have to do this!*

I burst past Snowkit, wrapping my tail quickly around hers and tugging her out of the nursery, making sure that no cat had seen us leave.

Still pulling Snowkit with my own tail, I swerved behind the nursery, not risking the run through the camp clearing where cats

could catch us.

I let out a yelp as Snowkit then yanked her tail away from mine. "Forget biting Thornclaw's tail off, I'd want to get rid of *yours*."

"Snowkit!" I continued to encourage. "We're already out of the nursery! Let's go find them!"

Snowkit's blue eyes filled with wariness. "But we should maybe tell Firestar first, shouldn't we?" She asked, glancing back at the Highledge where the Clan leader slept.

"He'd never let us do this!" I retorted.

"Hm, that says something, doesn't it?"

"Come on! *Please!*"

I flicked my ears in satisfaction as Snowkit finally groaned, looking as if she had given up. "Fine!" She seceded, rolling her eyes. "But we had better not get into trouble!"

"Yes!" I squealed. "You won't regret this!"

"We'll see about that."

Snowkit following cautiously behind me, I took one last look back at the camp before running into the forest through the dirtplace trail.

# Chapter 6

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Ashfur," I growled as the gray tom emerged from the bushes.

"Lilypetal."

I couldn't help but flinch slightly as I watched Ashfur slowly slide his claws out and begin to sink them into the earth, his expression not giving away one single thing.

It stayed that way for several heartbeats - me standing in front of Thornclaw, staring back at Ashfur.

I narrowed my eyes as I realized that the tom wasn't making any sort of advances. *Is there a possibility that Thornclaw and I may be able to send Ashfur out peacefully?* I wondered. *Maybe this doesn't have to be dangerous.*

Continuing to shield Thornclaw, I decided to put out the first word. "I don't know if you were confused or lost," I muttered sarcastically to Ashfur, my eyes still narrowed, "But this is ThunderClan territory. Firestar sent you away, remember?"

My stomach twisted up into a knot as I saw something flash in Ashfur's eyes. He then murmured, his eyes beginning to glitter with indignation, "Oh, I remember."

"Then why are you here?" Thornclaw hissed, padding up from behind me to flank me. "*Get out.* You've been lingering around here for far too long already."

Ashfur completely ignored Thornclaw's words, his gaze not shifting from where I stood. "I remember Firestar sending me away *very* well, Lilypetal," Ashfur growled, beginning to pace from side to side. "How could I *forget*?"

"Well, you've obviously forgotten what it means to be *exiled*!" I barked back, my fur beginning to bristle.

Unfortunately, I hadn't thought before I spat those words, not realizing that they would probably send Ashfur over the edge. And sure enough, I let out a fearful screech as Ashfur hissed and leaped at me without hesitation.

*Well, I guess settling this peacefully is out of the question,* I thought as Ashfur bowled me over and pinned me down to the ground. I hissed in pain as the tom raked his claws down my flank.

And now, I've said many times in combat before that it was the most unbearable thing I had ever felt, but, as Twolegs say, this one definitely took the cake.

As I attempted to claw at the gray tom's muzzle, it was then that I realized that this was the first fight that I had ever been in that wasn't with a warrior. So far, I had fought Squirrelflight when I first trespassed on ThunderClan territory, in battle training, and in the eclipse battle between all of the Clans. All of these cats I had fought were bound by the warrior code, which states that warriors don't fight to kill.

But Ashfur was not a warrior anymore. Ashfur was now an exile, and an exile with a grudge.

This cat wasn't going to show me any mercy.

Not only was I going to fight to defend any sort of honor, but I was fighting to *survive*.

This realization caused a rush of adrenaline to surge through me, and with it I was able to kick Ashfur off of me with my hind paws. Immediately once Ashfur was off of my belly, I jumped back up, ready to leap onto him.

Although the blood was practically roaring in my ears, I could just barely hear Thornclaw yowling my name. As I pelted back towards Ashfur, I tried to whip my head around to see where my mate was, but he wasn't anywhere in my sight. It was only by his yowls that I

knew that he was close by.

*What in the name of StarClan is he doing?* I thought irritably. *I'd think he'd have leaped into this fight to help me by now!*

As concerned as I was for my mate, I had to push the anger away, knowing quite well that I couldn't take even one moment to think.

I needed to make sure that this fleapelt I was facing was going to leave ThunderClan territory once and for all.

Before I decided to leap on Ashfur, I skidded to a halt, realizing that I didn't want to do this the old-fashioned way. *Ashfur is going to expect me to do this,* I realized. *We're going to go with the element of surprise.*

I then remembered what Firestar had told me at my first battle training session in ThunderClan. *A crucial part of battle is throwing off your opponent, so that it is easier to intimidate them or inflict wounds.*

Acting on that direction I had been given moons before, I just barely got to see the flash of confusion in Ashfur's blue eyes as I pelted past him, veering around to his back side. I turned my back to Ashfur as quickly as I could before putting all of my weight on my forepaws and using my hind legs to kick against the tom's back.

Ashfur let out a startled yelp as he was bumped forward. To my luck, he landed awkwardly and fell onto his side.

Taking the opportunity, I let out a yowl and leaped on top of Ashfur, sinking one claw into his shoulder to hold him down and using the other to rake down his side.

As he then let out a screech of pain, I sunk my claw deeper into his shoulder and bent my head down close to his ear. "If I see you padding around this territory again," I hissed into his ear, "You may not have paws to pad with anymore."

I saw fear flash in the gray tom's eyes, and I warily stepped back to let him stand up. As he glared back at me, his eyes glowing with malice, I wondered for a moment if he was going to leap at me

again, but he just continued to stand there, panting. Blood was beginning to well up from his flank wounds. I tried to ignore my own injuries, letting my claws sink into the ground.

"Get. Out." I muttered. "I never want to see your sorry pelt again!"

My eyes widened as Ashfur opened his mouth to say something, but after a few moments hesitation, he closed it again before finally running off into the forest. I watched with narrowed eyes as he pelted towards where I knew to be ShadowClan territory.

*I'm already praying to StarClan that ShadowClan would send him away too,* I thought. *Hopefully any of the four Clans would!*

Once Ashfur was completely gone from sight, I let out a pained huff as I let myself fall onto the ground, absolutely exhausted. I felt as if I had never fought as fiercely as I had now, and it had sucked all of the energy out of me. My wounds weren't making it much better. *I'm mostly just weakened by exhaustion,* I realized. *My wounds don't seem too deep, and they don't hurt badly!*

"Mother, that was amazing!"

I shot my head up from where I had been lying as I heard a high-pitched meow come from behind me. I scanned the clearing, and couldn't suppress a gasp as I saw *Snowkit* and *Goldenkit* standing just a few tail-lengths away, with Thornclaw beside them. Goldenkit was the one who had spoken. Her eyes were gleaming with fascination and excitement.

*Goldenkit and Snowkit are out of the camp? Did they escape?*

Before I could say anything to question them, I was interrupted by the worried meow of Thornclaw.

"Lilypetal!" My mate exclaimed, quickly padding up to me and digging his muzzle into my neck. "I am *so* sorry! Are you alright?"

I let out a sigh as I finally forced myself to stand up. I let myself lean against Thornclaw as he began to urgently lick my ears. "I will be okay," I reassured him. "Once Leafpool and Jayfeather patch me up, I'll be just fine."

"I am so, so sorry that I didn't help you. You know that I would," Thornclaw insisted, pulling away from me to meet my gaze. He then lashed his tail over to where our two daughters were standing, their eyes wide. "Goldenkit and Snowkit appeared as soon as Ashfur attacked, and I didn't know what to do!"

I then immediately felt bad for ever feeling angry towards Thornclaw when I had been fighting Ashfur, wondering why he hadn't jumped in to help me. He had been doing what any good father would have done, and protected his daughters.

I let a purr rumble in my throat as I licked my mate's cheek. "It's okay," I whispered. "Thank you for watching them. You're wonderful."

After staring at Thornclaw warmly for just a few heartbeats, I realized that I now had something *else* to take care of.

I shut my eyes, suddenly trying to push down sheer anger. "Goldenkit and Snowkit," I called to my daughters sharply, beckoning them over with my tail.

I heard what sounded like a gasp from Snowkit, and I opened my eyes again to see her and Goldenkit padding towards me, their eyes filled with reluctance and fear.

I exchanged a glance with Thornclaw before taking a deep breath, as an attempt to keep myself calm. "I don't know what StarClan forsaken reason could *possibly* bring you to think that doing what you have done is okay," I muttered, trying to keep my voice even. "Why did you two leave camp?"

When both of my kits hesitated, I went on, not being able to hold back the fury in my voice this time as I began to pace. "Can you imagine would could have happened if Ashfur had found the two of you before Thornclaw and I did?" I growled, letting myself sit down as I shook my head slowly. "You could have been killed tonight."

I couldn't suppress a shudder as I thought about all of the possibilities of danger that Goldenkit and Snowkit could have faced if Thornclaw hadn't found them when he did. They could have

gotten lost, taken away by an owl, and Ashfur, I'm sure, would have ripped the two of them to pieces if he had found them.

I let out a shaky sigh as I turned my head back to look at Snowkit and Goldenkit. I felt Thornclaw running his tail down my flank, trying to sooth me as I rasped, "*What* were you *thinking*?"

I felt a small pang of sadness as I watched Snowkit and Goldenkit hang their heads down in shame.

"I'm so sorry, Mother," Snowkit mewed quietly. "We were worried about you."

"You and father had been gone for *so* long," Goldenkit continued. "We wanted to go and find you and be heroes."

I let my eyes close again as Thornclaw muttered, "The only heroic thing that could have happened was giving *poor* Ashfur, the exile, a scrap of kit meat to eat for dinner."

Goldenkit let out a gasp, taking a couple of steps back. She exchanged a fearful glance with Snowkit before murmuring, "We didn't even think about the fact that he was maybe around..."

"Which is *exactly* why you two shouldn't have left camp in the first place!" Thornclaw growled. "Not only is it against the warrior code, but as your mother said, you were putting yourself in serious danger! You two are almost apprentices, I expect more from you!"

I then watched as Thornclaw seemed to realize that he needed to calm himself down as I did. I lightly touched my nose to his ear as he took a deep breath. He stared at his two daughters for several heartbeats, and I followed his gaze to see that both Snowkit and Goldenkit now seemed at a loss for words, their heads still low to the ground.

I leaned towards Thornclaw. "Great StarClan, what do we do with these two?" I muttered into his ear.

As I pulled away and looked into his gaze, I realized that he and I seemed to be thinking the same thing. I purred with amusement as Thornclaw quickly nodded his head to the two kits, his eyes

gleaming with humor. "I think they've learned their lesson," he whispered to me, winking.

I winked back at my mate before retuning my gaze to Snowkit and Goldenkit.

"Now, Snowkit and Goldenkit," I mewed in a much softer voice than before, "You two understand why Thornclaw and I have gotten angry, right?"

Both Snowkit and Goldenkit nodded slowly, while Goldenkit spoke first. "We left the camp when we shouldn't have," she murmured begrudgingly. "We broke the rules and put ourselves in danger."

"And we also didn't listen to what Lilypetal and Thornclaw originally told us," Snowkit hissed to her sister before turning away and shaking her head. "I should have never let you convince me to leave."

I exchanged another amused glance with Thornclaw after Snowkit spoke. *This was Goldenkit's idea,* I realized. *Why does that not surprise me?*

I then watched as Goldenkit shot Snowkit a glare. "We're really and truly sorry," she then meowed, swishing her golden tail back and forth, brushing dirt and leaves on the ground behind her. "We won't ever do this again."

Thornclaw let out a sigh beside me before padding forward to touch both of his daughters on the head with his tail. "Actions speak louder than words," Thornclaw murmured gently to them. "Show your mother and I how good and responsible you can be from now on."

As Thornclaw pulled away from Goldenkit, I saw that her eyes now looked brighter. "We will!" She purred. "We definitely will!"

I let out a relieved huff, glad that this confrontation was over, before looking up to the sky to see that the moon was quickly climbing to the top of the sky.

I gasped, looking back down to meet Thornclaw's gaze. "It's almost

moonhigh!" I exclaimed, already beginning to pad towards camp and beckoning Goldenkit and Snowkit to follow. "Firestar will be sending out a search patrol for us soon. We have to get back!"

I then hissed as a sharp pain ran down my flank, right where Ashfur had ran his claws.

Thornclaw trotted quickly up to me, letting me fall onto his shoulder again. "And we have to get you to the medicine den!" He meowed, licking my head.

I then watched as Thornclaw turned his head to look back. "And Goldenkit and Snowkit will walk in *front* of us," he muttered sharply. "You two aren't leaving our sight."

As Snowkit and Goldenkit trotted forward, I continued to lean on Thornclaw, realizing that now that I wasn't focusing on the fact that my kits had escaped camp, all I could focus on was my exhaustion and that I was in pain.

But, I then shook my head quickly. *It doesn't matter,* I told myself. *It was worth it. I chased off Ashfur as I said I would, and he is hopefully gone from ThunderClan's forest forever.*

# Chapter 7

[image]

***Goldenkit's POV***

"Goldenkit, we are *not* doing anything like that ever again!"

I rolled my eyes and groaned at Snowkit's growl as I watched her pace the nursery.

It was the sunhigh after Snowkit and I had snuck out of camp, and since then Snowkit had been cross with me. She had been giving me harsh looks since we arrived back in camp last night. *And when Lilypetal was getting her wounds treated, Snowkit wouldn't even talk to me, and she didn't say a word to me until this morning!* I realized. She hadn't even slept close to me last night.

Snowkit's protesting words were the first that I heard come out of her mouth. After I had woken up, I couldn't stand the fact that Snowkit was giving me the silent treatment, so I had padded over to where she was talking with Bumblekit and Briarkit and told her that I didn't want her to be mad at me anymore, and that she should try and forgive me.

After Snowkit's harsh words, I raised one eyebrow, lashing my tail irritably. "We didn't get punished!" I protested.

Snowkit glared back at me. "So what? I don't like getting in trouble!"

"You didn't have to go with me!"

"Are you kidding me? You *forced* me to go!"

Just as I was about to give my sister another spitting retort, I gasped as I saw Lilypetal's head pop into the nursery, and she had a vole in her mouth.

"What are you two fighting about?" She meowed through a full

mouth, both of her eyebrows raised.

I stomped up to her, barely being able to contain my anger. "Snowkit's mad at me for a stupid reason!"

Lilypetal looked as if she was trying to suppress a purr of amusement before setting the vole down. "What would be this stupid reason?" she asked gently. "Although, I think that I can guess..."

"I'm mad that she got me in trouble!" Snowkit squeaked. "I never wanted to leave camp in the first place!"

Lilypetal padded over to the two of us and then proceeded to run her tail down Snowkit's flank. "Snowkit, it's all over. Thornclaw and I trust that you have learned your lesson. You are not in trouble anymore," Lilypetal insisted, her hazel eyes warm. "But you certainly will be if you do it again."

Snowkit sighed with relief at Lilypetal's words, but immediately shot me a glare after. I just lashed my tail with annoyance. *Why does Snowkit have to take things so seriously sometimes?* I wondered, rolling my eyes. *Sometimes I feel like* she's *my mother, and not Lilypetal!*

I let out a huff as Lilypetal padded over and sat in our nest. I quickly trotted over to join her, suddenly feeling the urge to dig myself back into her soft tabby-and-white fur.

As I began to press my head to my mother's flank, I felt her wince. I lifted my head and gasped, completely forgetting that Lilypetal was still recovering from her injuries she'd gotten the night before.

"Oh, mother, I'm sorry!" I exclaimed, sitting back up and trying to observe her flank. "Are you okay?"

To my relief, Lilypetal's face didn't show that she was in pain, and she simply let out a purr of amusement and touched my ear with her nose. "That's alright, Goldenkit. My wounds are recovering quickly, but the touch just struck me a little bit!" Lilypetal insisted.

I whipped my head around to see Snowkit trotting towards eyes,

her pale blue eyes filled with concern. "Maybe you should take it easy today?" She suggested before meeting my gaze. "And as much as I don't like to say it, maybe we shouldn't be anywhere near her injury. We don't want to irr... irra..." Snowkit then looked down to the ground, clearly trying to figure out what she wanted to say. I couldn't help but snicker as I watched her.

I lifted my head up to look at Lilypetal as I heard a purr rumble in her throat. "Is 'irritate' the word you are looking for?" She purred, bending down to lick Snowkit's head.

Snowkit's eyes then lit up, her head nodding up and down quickly. "Irritate, yes!" she exclaimed. "We wouldn't want to irritate it."

"That is a very good point, Snowkit," Lilypetal meowed softly as she looked warmly at Snowkit. "You are very smart."

*Hey!* Just as I was about to open my mouth to say something in protest, Lilypetal turned her warm gaze towards me and licked my head. "And so are you," Lilypetal purred to me.

I then tilted my head as my mother let out a snort. "At least, when you're not frolicking through the forest without permission." She teased, lightly poking Snowkit's and my belly lightly with her tail.

I then let out a purr as I dug my head into Lilypetal's neck fur, overwhelmed with affection. I purred even more loudly when I felt Snowkit brush my fur next to me, doing the same.

*Thank StarClan, I don't think she's mad at me anymore!* I realized. *We're best friends again.*

I then realized something else that brought a wave of sadness through me. *It won't be for much longer that the three of us, plus Thornclaw when he isn't patrolling, to snuggle and be together like this,* I thought. *Snowkit and I are going to be apprentices any time now!*

I then heard Lilypetal sigh, and I pulled away as I heard her begin to speak.

"I can't believe you two will be apprentices in less than a moon!" she meowed, her voice shaking slightly with emotion as she

repeated my thoughts out loud. "Time flys by, doesn't it?"

"You're telling me!" Snowkit whimpered, pulling away from Lilypetal's fur. "I'll miss being with you all of the time."

"Me too!" I agreed, exchanging a sad glance with Snowkit. "But I'm also really excited to become an apprentice."

"Oh, I know you are!" Snowkit purred, glancing over at me with humor in her eyes. "There's no doubt about that."

"You've talked about becoming an apprentice since you *could* talk!" Lilypetal meowed with laughter.

I shrugged as I let out a purr of amusement. It was true, the thought of becoming an apprentice was a pleasant one. It was one step closer to being a warrior, and getting to hunt on your own, fight in battles, go on patrols and even *lead* them!

"That's true," I murmured, looking up at Lilypetal sympathetically. I really hoped that my mother knew that even though I wanted to be an apprentice very badly, it didn't mean that I wanted to leave her. *No, it definitely doesn't mean that!* I said to myself. *I won't be able to stand how much I'll miss her!* "But being with you and Thornclaw in the nursery is great too. I'll be sad when it's over..."

I then tilted my head in confusion as I watched a smile emerge on Lilypetal's face.

"But you know what's great?" Lilypetal asked, her eyes growing bright. "It's not over yet!"

Snowkit and I exchanged an excited glance at Lilypetal's words. I then watched as Lilypetal nodded to an old mossball that was lying a few mouselengths away. "Bring that ball of moss over here," she meowed to me. "Let's play!"

As I turned and bounced to over to the mossball excitedly, I saw Snowkit's eyes widen.

"But you're recovering!' She pointed out as I began to bat the mossball over with my paws. "You shouldn't move around too

much!"

"Who says that I have to move?" Lilypetal asked before lifting up one of her paws to show us. "I've got *this*!"

Snowkit and I both *mrrowed* with laughter. "Okay, then!" Snowkit meowed.

"Then let's play!" I exclaimed, finally swiping my paw to hit the mossball towards Snowkit. And, soon enough, she, Lilypetal and I were in a full-on game of mossball.

*This is some of the most fun that I've ever had!* I thought happily. *Yes, Snowkit and I will be apprentices soon, but I'm going to try and enjoy moments like these until then!*

# Chapter 8

[image]

***Goldenkit's POV***

"Goldenkit! Wake up!" I could feel a paw prodding my back as Snowkit's voice rang in my ears. "Wake up! Wake up!"

*I'll wake up to claw your ears off!* I thought irritably as I opened my eyes. I immediately screwed my eyes back shut as I saw that Snowkit was flicking her tail in my face. I swiped her tail away with my paws to see that outside it wasn't even sunhigh yet. It was barely passed *dawn*!

"Snowkit, it's early!" I whined. I pushed her tail away as she continued to wave it in my face. My eyes widened and I couldn't help but flinch as Snowkit suddenly squealed. *She has never been this energetic! Did she get too much sleep?* I wondered.

I purred with amusement as I stood up, watching as my sister began to run around me and hop up and down.

"We're becoming apprentices today, Goldenkit!" She squeaked. "Get *with* it!"

I gasped as I realized that Snowkit was right. I had almost *completely* forgotten!

*Snowkit and I aren't just little kits in the nursery anymore!* I thought excitedly. *We're now training to become warriors!*

Squealing just as Snowkit had, I grabbed my sister's tail with my tail and pulled her out of the den as quickly as I could. "Let's *go*!" I urged her.

Snowkit and I padded out into the clearing to see that Lilypetal was already sitting down with Thornclaw next to her. Just by watching the two of them for a couple of heartbeats, I could tell that they

were just as excited as Snowkit and I were. I felt a purr rumble in my throat as I saw that my father's eyes were glowing with pride.

*Thornclaw is an amazing warrior. He is well-respected in this Clan, and he's done so much for ThunderClan,* I thought excitedly. *What if he were to mentor me? That would be great!*

I then shook my head quickly as I tried to push down my disappointment. *But leaders don't usually put apprentices with their kin,* I realized. *But I'm sure that whoever I get will be just as great!*

Now feeling just as optimistic as I did before, I padded up to my parents, Snowkit right behind me. "Hi!" I exclaimed, hopping up and down.

Both Thornclaw and Lilypetal turned their heads around to look at us.

"Hello there!" Thornclaw purred, touching his nose to each of our heads. "How are you two this fine, completely ordinary and uneventful morning?"

I stopped hopping as I was suddenly confused. I exchanged a glance with Snowkit, my one of my eyebrows raised before looking back at my father. "What do you mean?" I asked.

Thornclaw then let out a purr of amusement. "Well, it *would* be an ordinary and uneventful morning if my two kits weren't becoming apprentices today!"

Snowkit let out a *mrrow* of laughter beside me. "Oh, of course!" She squealed, kneading her paws into the ground.

"Hm. Don't mind your father," Lilypetal purred, nudging Thornclaw on the shoulder. "He can be quite the tease."

I began hopping up and down once again. "I don't care! He can tease all he wants!" I insisted. "I'm going to be an *apprentice*, I can handle the teasing!"

Lilypetal then let out a purr before bending down to nuzzle Snowkit and I on our heads with her muzzle. "I am so proud of you both,"

she meowed softly. "I have no doubt that you are going to train to the best of your ability."

*Of course I am!* I said to myself. *Why would I not do my best, knowing that being a warrior is the end result?*

As I began to drift off into my warrior fantasies, I flinched and let out a small yelp as I suddenly felt a tongue lapping at my flank. I whipped my head around to see that Lilypetal was grooming me.

I groaned and lightly pushed my mother's head away with my paws. "What are you doing?" I demanded.

Lilypetal lifted her head back up. "Well, you want to look nice for your ceremony, don't you?" She asked, tilting her head to the side.

I snorted. "Well, yeah," I meowed, "But I'm going to be an apprentice, so-"

"-So you can do it yourself," Lilypetal meowed, rolling her eyes with a smirk on her face. "I get it!"

As Lilypetal padded over to Snowkit to groom her, I licked at my paw and began to run it over my head and ears, making sure that not even one tuft of fur was sticking up.

I was smoothing out the fur along my flanks when I noticed Firestar emerge from his den on the Highledge. I watched him yawn as he bent down to take a quick stretch.

My heart then began to beat faster as I saw him raise his head to the sky. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, please gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

I realized that I was actually starting to get nervous as cats were beginning to crawl out of their dens. *I hope that I don't make a fool out of myself!* I thought. *I want to make a good impression on every cat here!*

I had to take a deep breath as the stirs of cats began to slow, as the camp clearing was now abundant with cats. I couldn't suppress a gasp as Firestar started to speak.

"We are gathered here today, because two of ThunderClan's kits have finally reached six moons of age, and are ready to become apprentices."

I exchanged an eager glance with Snowkit as the ThunderClan leader's glance fell down to us. "Goldenkit and Snowkit, please step forward."

Without hesitation, I began to do as Firestar instructed, but then paused as I noticed that Snowkit hadn't moved. I looked back at her to see a flash of nerves glowing in her blue eyes.

*She must have been hiding her nerves with all of that excitement she was putting off!* I realized. I fell back to walk beside her as we both traveled to stand just under the Highledge.

As soon as my sister and I were in place, Firestar nodded and then proceeded to leap down from the Highledge to stand in front of us.

"Until the both of you become warriors, you will be known as Goldenpaw and Snowpaw," the leader meowed proudly. I then puffed my chest out in pride as Firestar's gaze moved to me.

"Goldenpaw," Firestar meowed, nodding to me, "Your mentor will be Sorreltail." Firestar then averted his gaze to look at the tortoiseshell warrior. "Sorreltail, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Sandstorm and Dustpelt, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Goldenpaw."

I smiled and hopped up in excitement. *Sorreltail is a great warrior, and such a sweet cat!* I already knew that I was happy with Firestar's choice for my mentor.

I watched excitedly as I watched Sorreltail pad over to me, her eyes welcoming and bright. Once she stopped to stand in front of me, she bent down and touched her nose to mine. "Hi, Goldenpaw!" The she-cat purred as she pulled away. "I have heard that you have great promise. I was thrilled to hear Firestar pair my name up with yours!"

"Me too!" I squealed. "I'm so excited!"

I then gave Sorreltail a nod before turning around to watch Snowpaw receive her mentor. Firestar was just about to speak when my gaze fell on my sister's.

"Snowpaw, your mentor will be Brackenfur, who I know will do his best to pass on all that he knows to you," Firestar nodded to the ginger warrior, who was already beginning to walk over to Snowpaw. I tried to suppress a small purr of amusement as Snowpaw stared shyly back at her new mentor before finally pushing herself to touch noses with him.

"She's quite the shy one, isn't she?" Sorreltail muttered to me in my ear.

I looked up at her and nodded. "Yes, for sure," I answered. "We aren't alike in that regard."

Sorreltail snorted. "Definitely not! But Brackenfur is kind and patient. He will do well with her! She'll be a tough, bold and strong warrior in no time!"

Just as I was about to reply to Sorreltail, I was cut off by the yowls of my Clanmates calling out mine and Snowpaw's new names. "Goldenpaw! Snowpaw! Goldenpaw! Snowpaw!"

I scanned the clearing as cats called out the new names. Although actually experiencing the ceremony and receiving my mentor was awesome, just hearing cats call out my name made the fact that I was an apprentice now made it feel all the more real! *I'm not a kit anymore!* I told myself. *I'm a ThunderClan apprentice!*

I hadn't realized how much I had let myself drift off into the clouds until I saw that Sorreltail had started to walk towards the camp entrance. When she noticed that I wasn't following, she paused and looked back at me.

"Goldenpaw, are you coming?" Sorreltail purred, humor glittering in her eyes. "Would you rather stand there than go out to see your territory?"

*Well, I suppose it's not my first time out of camp, but it'll feel a little better now that I'm* allowed.

I shook my head quickly and started to follow my new mentor. "Standing around is for *kits*!" I squealed. "I'm ready when you are!"

# Chapter 9

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

To be honest, I didn't know if I was relieved or completely dismayed at this point.

As Goldenpaw's and Snowpaw's apprentice ceremony had ended, I couldn't help at the time letting out a shaky sigh. I could barely stand how much I missed my kits already. I had always looked forward to going back to my warrior duties, of course, but I would never get to bond with them as much anymore, since I would be busy with warrior duties and they would be training.

*But I'm going to do all in my power to try and keep our relationship as close as it can be, despite us being separated,* I told myself. *Sharing a nest in the nursery together isn't the extent of our relationship!*

I was pulled away from my deep thoughts as I felt Thornclaw, who was still next to me, nudge me on the shoulder.

"Hey, look there," Thornclaw whispered into my ear, nodding to the camp entrance.

I followed my mate's gaze to see Goldenpaw's tail disappearing through the gorse tunnel, Brackenfur and Snowpaw following close behind.

"Our daughters walking out on their first day as apprentices," Thornclaw continued, a purr rumbling in his throat.

"Well, I'll be darned," I purred back, continuing to push the immense sadness and grief I felt in my heart. "They are going to be fantastic, aren't they?"

"I have no doubt," Thornclaw murmured, twinning his tail around mine.

I let out another rough sigh as I leaned on the golden tabby's shoulder, my mind spiraling with so many different emotions. I almost immediately lifted my head back up, realizing that I really needed to go out and clear my head.

I turned my head to meet Thornclaw's gaze. "I'm going to take a walk in the forest. Do you want to come with me?" I asked him, touching my nose to his cheek. "I'd love your company."

Thornclaw sighed as I pulled away, giving me a look that was a mix of warmth and regret. "I would, but I've already been assigned to lead a hunting patrol. We're supposed to leave once the apprentice ceremony is done," he meowed softly. "I'm sorry, my love."

I rolled my eyes and meowed sarcastically, "And you should be sorry! Serving your Clan? How *dare* you?"

Thornclaw purred with amusement and touched his nose to mine. "I'll see you later," he murmured before turning around to join Brightheart, Hollyleaf and Lionblaze. "Let's go on a walk together later, if you feel up to another one!"

I gave my mate a warm look before beginning to pad over to the camp entrance. Quite frankly, I was quite excited to get away from the hustle and bustle of the camp for a while. Going out to hunt for Ashfur and chasing him out had made me realize how much I missed getting out of camp. *Visits from cats, Thornclaw, and my kits were the only things keeping me sane!* I realized.

Just as I was about to crawl through the gorse tunnel, I heard a voice call my name from behind me.

"Hey, Lilypetal!"

I whipped my head around to see Squirrelflight trotting up to me. "Did I hear you saying that you were going on a walk?" She asked. I tilted my head as I noticed that their was a small gleam of anxiety in her eyes. "May I join you?"

I immediately nodded and beckoned Squirrelflight to follow with my tail. "Of course you can!" I insisted as the two of us then walked

side by side out into the forest.

For several heartbeats, we just walked in silence. Not necessarily because there was nothing to say. Rather, I had noticed that Squirrelflight seemed extremely deep in thought, and for some reason I felt like if I said something, I would cut her off from whatever she was trying to decipher inside that head.

But, I couldn't ignore the immense stress that radiated from the dark ginger she-cat. Her fur was slightly bristled, and her green eyes continued to glisten with anxiety.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked softly to Squirrelflight as I touched her ear with my nose. I flicked my ears as I watched Squirrelflight sigh and then proceed to sit down as we arrived in a small clearing.

There was more silence for several heartbeats. So, when Squirrelflight finally spoke, I nearly flinched.

"There are so many things running through my head," the she-cat murmured, shaking her head slowly.

"Well, that's completely understandable!" I insisted. "A lot has happened lately." I then proceeded to put the tip of my tail on Squirrelflight's shoulder. "But hey, Ashfur is gone! And now we know that he is gone for sure. Hopefully that makes things a little easier?"

Squirrelflight sighed. "I wish I could say that," Squirrelflight muttered, "But Ashfur might as well not have left at all."

I raised my eyebrows as I tilted my head with intrigue. On the inside, I actually found myself having to push down a bit of frustration. *You and I sure went through a heck of a lot to get him out of here,* I thought. *But alright... whatever flies your hedgehogs.*

I took a deep breath as Squirrelflight finally continued. "Jayfeather, Hollyleaf, and Lionblaze don't seem to care one bit that Ashfur is gone," she explained. "They seem to grow angrier and angrier with me every day."

Squirrelflight then lowered her head to the ground, letting out a

huff and clearly hesitating to say what she wanted to say next.

"And... they keep trying to make me tell them who their real mother is," she murmured in a voice just barely above a whisper.

I narrowed my eyes as I was suddenly brought back to the night of the fire that had ripped through ThunderClan's camp. Firestar had sent me back to camp to see if any more cats were left, and I had arrived to find myself in a confrontation that I didn't dare bring myself into. I had come to see that Ashfur had trapped Hollyleaf, Lionblaze, and Jayfeather in a fire, blocking their way of escape. He had claimed that he was doing it to seek revenge against Squirrelflight because she hadn't become his mate.

In her rage, Squirrelflight had revealed that the three cats trapped in the fire were not really her kits, and that Lionblaze, Jayfeather and Hollyleaf had been living their lives as a lie.

Up until now, I hadn't dared asked Squirrelflight who their real mother was. It wasn't like I didn't care, but I just didn't want to tread my paws where they didn't belong.

I then let out a quiet snort to myself. *Well, I suppose we're way past that at this point,* I realized. *I mean, it's the whole reason I've made an enemy out of Ashfur in the first place!*

I opened my mouth and immediately closed it again, trying to figure out what I wanted to say. *Maybe if I found out who the mother is, I could help them hide the secret!* I realized to myself. *What's the worst that could happen? I ask her who it is and she says she's not comfortable telling me? I'm okay with that!*

Coming to a decision, I took a deep breath before speaking.

"So... I hope you don't mind me asking, but who is the mother?"

Squirrelflight lifted her head and looked at me, her eyes flashing with alarm.

*Shoot, now she's mad at me. I never should have asked.*

I looked away, not being able to bear keeping Squirrelflight's gaze.

"Sorry..." I murmured to her. I raised my eyebrows in surprise as I then felt Squirrelflight put the tip of her tail on my shoulder.

"It's fine, really" she assured me. "I... I understand why you'd ask."

I turned back to face her. *Is she actually going to tell me?*

I simply watched as Squirrelflight then sighed and closed her green eyes.

"The mother is Leafpool."

# Chapter 10

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"The mother is *Leafpool*?" I exclaimed before immediately slapping my tail over my mouth and speaking more quietly. "Leafpool, as in the medicine cat of ThunderClan?"

Squirrelflight's eyes widened. She turned and looked around to make sure that no cat had heard my stupid scream. After a few heartbeats, she faced me again and nodded.

"Yes," she meowed, sounding like she needed to force out the word.

"Wow," I breathed, shaking my head slowly. To say the least, I was shocked. I never, ever would have guessed that Leafpool would do such a thing. She had always seemed like she was dedicated to her medicine cat duties, and nothing else. The fact that Jayfeather, Lionblaze, and Hollyleaf were hers absolutely blew my mind.

*I'm sure whoever the father is will shock me even more,* I realized. "So... then who's-"

Squirrelflight already seemed to know what I was going to ask. "They're Crowfeather's."

*That cranky furball?* I thought, my mouth dropping open. "Crowfeather of *WindClan*?" I questioned. "Great StarClan, Leafpool sure didn't make things easy for herself, did she?"

Squirrelflight snorted. "Definitely not," she murmured. "For moons they met in secret, and they even tried to run away together."

"No way!" I exclaimed. I was shocked that I hadn't even heard just that part before. But now, looking back, I realized that I should have suspected something pretty early into me joining the Clans.

I still remembered vividly when WindClan had ambushed the

ThunderClan camp in the middle of the night. It had definitely been a smart move on WindClan's part, because ThunderClan was left confused, tired, and baffled as they realized they would have to defend themselves in battle at a time when they should be sleeping. The first cat I had leaped at was the gray-black pelt of Crowfeather, and unfortunately neither of us ended up "winning" per se, because Firestar yowled for the battle to stop before that could happen.

Something that had confused me up until this point, was the look I had seen on Leafpool's face when I was fighting Crowfeather, a look of complete fear and worry. Now, it all made sense - she had been scared for her former mate, and she didn't want to watch him be hurt.

I sighed, trying to process everything I was being told. "If they ran away," I continued, "What made them both decide to come back?"

Squirrelflight simply shrugged. "Leafpool knew in her heart that she belonged in ThunderClan, serving them as her medicine cat."

"That definitely sounds more like Leafpool," I murmured aloud.

I then thought up another question I had yet to ask. It had been poking at me for a while, since I had witnessed the confrontation in the fire, in fact. I remembered that Squirrelflight had told Ashfur that she had hidden the secret of Lionblaze's, Jayfeather's and Hollyleaf's parents from everyone, *including* Brambleclaw.

"So... you did all of this to help Leafpool, right?" I pressed. "If that's all it was... why doesn't Brambleclaw know about it? Why couldn't you tell him?"

I then watched as Squirrelflight's eyes flashed with guilt for a single heartbeat, almost as if she had not ever asked that question herself.

When Squirrelflight stayed silent, I flicked my ears. "Don't you trust him?" I asked, tilting my head. *Personally, if I was hiding the identity of some kit's parents, I would want Thornclaw's help*, I thought. *I know that I could trust him to keep a secret with me.*

I flinched as Squirrelflight then demanded, "Of *course* I trust him!

Don't be ridiculous." She then began to try and dodge my gaze as she murmured, "I guess... I guess Leafpool didn't want anyone else to know. I didn't want to do anything that would make her uncomfortable."

I nodded. "I can understand that," I meowed before putting the tip of my tail on Squirrelflight's shoulder and meeting her green gaze. "I promise that everything you've just told me is staying right here," I murmured, putting one of my paws on the top of my head.

My heart lifted as Squirrelflight let out a purr of amusement. "Good," she murmured, dipping her head. I then purred with amusement myself as I watched her let out a loud huff and fall to the ground. "Great *StarClan*, it feels great to get that out to someone!"

"I can imagine!" I purred, sitting down beside where the ginger she-cat was lying. "How long has this been a secret?"

Squirrelflight lifted up her head as she rolled her eyes. "Let's just say, *too* long!"

I sniffed. "Well, now that I know, I will do everything I can to make sure that it stays that way," I meowed, giving Squirrelflight a sharp nod.

Squirrelflight then stood up before proceeding to touch her nose to mine. "Thank you, Lilypetal, really."

"Of course," I whispered as she pulled away. I then nodded my head in the direction of camp. "So, now that you've emptied those words from your body, how about you fill it up with some fresh-kill?"

Squirrelflight let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Let's go," she meowed, padding beside me as we traveled through the sunlit forest.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Squirrelflight and I were sharing a young squirrel, Squirrelflight's favorite, when I suddenly heard some very familiar yelps come from the camp entrance.

"Lilypetal, Lilypetal, Lilypetal!" Goldenpaw was yowling. "Lilypetal! Thornclaw! Parents! *Somebody*!"

I exchanged an amused glance with Squirrelflight before turning my head to see my daughter's golden pelt burst from the gorse tunnel, Snowpaw right behind her, and Brackenfur and Sorreltail taking the rear.

*They're back from their first day as apprentices!* I realized happily. I gave Squirrelflight a nod in farewell before standing up to meet my arriving kits.

"We just got back from our apprentice training!" Goldenpaw squealed, her tail twitching excitedly.

I let out a loud *mrrow* of laughter. "I can see that!" I purred.

"Where's Thornclaw?" Snowpaw asked, padding up to stand next to her sister. "I wanted him to be here when we got back!"

I touched the white she-cat's ear with my nose. "He left for patrol a while ago, but I'm sure he'll love to hear about your day once he is back," I answered before looking back and forth from Goldenpaw to Snowpaw. "So, how was it?"

"Goldenpaw and I got to see the *whole* territory!" Snowpaw mewed, her eyes wide with awe.

"And don't worry, this time it was *allowed*!" Goldenpaw teased, winking one of her eyes at me.

"I would hope so," I purred, exchanging a humored glance with Brackenfur and Sorreltail before looking back at my kits. "Are you all ready for another day tomorrow?"

Goldenpaw nodded eagerly. "Couldn't be more ready!" She answered proudly before nudging Snowpaw with her shoulder. "Right, Snowpaw?"

"Definitely!" Snowpaw purred back. "Tomorrow, Brackenfur said that he and Sorreltail would teach us how to hunt!"

*Hunt!* I repeated to myself as I tried to blink back the emotion that was welling up in my eyes. My kits were growing up!

I then watched as Goldenpaw turned to face her sister. "Snowpaw, I'm starving!" She exclaimed. "Let's eat!"

Snowpaw nodded, licking her lips as her gaze fell onto the fresh-kill pile. "You don't have to tell me twice!" She meowed, leading Goldenpaw over to the pile of animals.

I gasped as I realized that this was the first meal that Goldenpaw and Snowpaw would be picking out themselves. *None of this feels real to me yet!* I thought before shouting out to the two apprentices, "Don't eat so much that you make yourself sick!"

I watched my daughters for a few moments, sighing with relief as I watched them pick out a simple vole to share together. One I knew that they were settled, I turned around to face Sorreltail and Brackenfur, who had been approaching me.

"So..." I began, narrowing my eyes and smirking, "Was their first day as great for the two of you?"

Sorreltail purred with amusement as she nodded. "I am pleased to tell you that it was!" She meowed happily. "But I have to say... that Goldenpaw of yours is quite the pawful!"

I wasn't surprised at all by Sorreltail's words. "She's always been an energetic little fireball!" I purred. "She's very eager to learn new things."

"*Very eager*. Hm, that's an understatement!" Sorreltail joked. "If she had gotten a mentor that was any less patient than I was, I'm almost *sure* that their head would have exploded with all of her questions."

I stared at Sorreltail sympathetically as she spoke. But I flicked my ears as I noticed the tortoiseshell she-cat glancing over at where Goldenpaw was sitting with her sister, her eyes glittering with admiration. "But in all honesty, I can't get enough of her!" She then meowed. "She may seem a bit overbearing to some, but her enthusiasm is incredible."

"So, just like you were when you were an apprentice," Brackenfur teased to his mate, touching his muzzle to her cheek. "And I agree, Goldenpaw is going to be a wonderful apprentice. Snowpaw is an entirely different story."

I snorted, realizing that I wasn't surprised by Brackenfur's words either. I tilted my head and raised my eyebrows at the tabby tom. "Is she?" I asked with intrigue.

Brackenfur nodded. "Goldenpaw asks the questions, but Snowpaw sits and listens to the answers very intently," he explained to me. "She is a *great* listener, in fact. I know that she is hearing everything that I tell her, which will help her immensely once she begins to learn how to hunt and fight."

"I'm so glad!" I exclaimed, before leaning in closer to the two cats. "But make sure to let me know if there's ever trouble!"

Sorreltail and Brackenfur exchanged an amused glance as they purred. "We will!" Sorreltail reassured me as she and Brackenfur began to pad over to the fresh-kill pile to join their apprentices. "See you later, Lilypetal!"

"Bye!"

As I watched Sorreltail and Brackenfur settle down with Snowpaw and Goldenpaw, pride for the both of my daughters welled up in my heart. *Their mentors already seem to see the potential that I've* always *seen in them,* I thought pleasantly. *They are going to become warriors that ThunderClan will be proud of.*

# Chapter 11

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

It wasn't until I had gone to sleep that I realized just how exhausted my first day out as an apprentice had caused me to be. I mean, I had traveled around the *entirety* of ThunderClan territory. I had made sure that Brackenfur and Sorreltail didn't miss even one little piece of the territory, I had wanted to see everything!

But, I had woken up the next morning to find that I could barely move my legs from how sore they were. It had taken me a few heartbeats to get them working normally again. But I didn't care! I'd break *all* of my legs if it meant that I'd get even just *one* extra day as an apprentice.

But luckily I knew that it wouldn't take that much. All I had to do was *ask!*

It had been not too long since I had woken up, just a few heartbeats in fact, and the dim dawn light was slowly being replaced with the bright beams of the sun.

Once I had gotten the stiffness out of my legs, I hopped up from my nest and crawled out of the apprentices den. I snorted to myself as I remembered that last night, I had nearly forgotten that I was an apprentice and that I had to sleep in the apprentices den.

I had accidentally walked into the nursery. But luckily Millie had quickly pointed out that I was in the wrong den.

*That's so weird!* I had thought as I turned around to walk towards the apprentices den. *Lilypetal, Snowpaw, Thornclaw and I don't share a nest in their anymore! Now its empty, awaiting other queens to take its place...*

Those thoughts resurfaced now this morning as I looked back at the

apprentices den, but I immediately shook them away. *Goldenpaw, yesterday was amazing!* I told myself. *You're an apprentice now! There's no time to be sad on that, when there's not much to be sad about!*

I then began to pad out in the open, looking for Snowpaw, who had not been in the apprentices den when I woke up. *Where is she? She was up early for the apprentice ceremony yesterday too*, I realized. *I guess she's just an early bird these days!*

I flicked my ears as almost right at once, I saw Snowpaw sitting near the medicine cat den.

*There she is!*

"Snowpaw!" I exclaimed as I ran over to join my sister. "Snowpaw!"

I skidded to a halt once I was about a tail-length in front of her. "Do you want to see if Brackenfur and Sorreltail can take us out training right now?"

Snowpaw then peered past me, her gaze focused.

"Hey!" I hissed, already growing frustrated. "Snowpaw!" *What is her problem?*

I turned my head around to try and see where she was looking. I narrowed my eyes as I realized that it seemed that she was staring straight at the medicine cat den.

As I whipped my head back around to face Snowpaw, she suddenly blinked and shook her head quickly. "Huh? I'm sorry, what was that?" she asked, suddenly alert.

I let out a loud and exaggerated sigh. Snowpaw always had her head in the clouds!

I repeated my question to my sister. "I asked if you wanted to see if Brackenfur and Sorreltail can take us out training!"

I let out an almost inaudible confused grunt as Snowpaw simply just blinked again and then shrugged. "Sure, I guess," she murmured.

Not wanting to wonder about Snowpaw's suspicious behavior anymore, I padded past her to walk over to Sorreltail and Brackenfur, who were sharing a vole near the fresh-kill pile. It was only a moment later that I realized that Snowpaw wasn't following me, and I looked back to see that she was still looking back at the medicine cat den.

*Great StarClan!* I thought irritably as I switched directions to return to where Snowpaw was still standing. "Snowpaw, come on!" I urged, lightly nudging her shoulder with my tail. but I let out a groan as she still didn't budge.

"What do you think Jayfeather is doing right now?" she asked absentmindedly.

"Snowpaw!" I hissed one last time to get her attention. "Who cares? Let's go see our mentors and see if we can go out training now!"

Snowpaw didn't avert her gaze at first.

"Okay," she then murmured before *finally* turning towards me and following me over to Sorreltail and Brackenfur.

*Snowpaw is always starring off at something, or is deep in thought,* I told myself. *But... I have to admit, it's never been this bad before. Usually if I talk to her she snaps out of it.*

I tried to push away my worries as Snowpaw and I arrived to where Sorreltail and Brackenfur were settled down. As soon as we came into their view, they lifted their heads from their prey.

"Good morning, you two!" Brackenfur meowed kindly, dipping his head to the both of us.

"Good morning!" I purred back. I glanced back to where Snowpaw was standing, and luckily she wasn't looking back at anything, and she was focused. Feeling more relieved, I then turned back to Brackenfur and Sorreltail.

"Do you think after you're done eating we can go out training?" I asked eagerly.

Brackenfur and Sorreltail exchanged a glance, their eyes glittering with humor.

"Please?" Snowpaw pleaded, but I narrowed my eyes as I thought that she didn't sound too enthusiastic. *Well, at least she's begging them like I am,* I tried to tell myself.

I was pulled back to the moment when Sorreltail began to speak. "Of course we can, just give us a moment to finish," Sorreltail said gently. "We were going to find you once we grabbed a bite to eat!"

"It's been a moment," I mewed quickly as Sorreltail bent down to take a bite of her vole.

Brackenfur let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Good one," he purred. "Just give us a little bit longer, okay?"

"Okay." Snowpaw and I spoke at the same time. We walked away from our mentors and decided to sit down near the apprentices den while we waited.

Almost instantly, I noticed that Snowpaw was still staring over at the medicine cat den, her pale blue eyes gleaming with fascination. It also seemed like she was subtly trying to pad closer and peer inside.

Not being able to take my confusion anymore, I nudged my sister with my shoulder.

"Hey, what's going on?" I demanded. "You've been staring at that den as if Tigerstar has come back from the dead!" I then felt a slight shiver run down my spine. *StarClan forbid!* I thought. *Tigerstar was scary! He tried to take over the whole forest back in the old territory!*

Snowpaw shook her head quickly before turning around to meet my gaze. "What do you mean? It's nothing!" She insisted.

"Really?" I asked, not buying my sister's words at all. "Well, then you're sure making a whole lot out of *nothing*!"

I then watched as Snowpaw was clearly hesitating. "Well... I guess it's not nothing," she admitted. "It's just... a medicine cat job seems

so cool! Don't you think?"

I gasped and stared back at Snowpaw wide-eyed. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *Is she serious?*

"You want to become a *medicine cat*!?" I asked out loud, still in complete shock.

I rolled my eyes and let out an exasperated sigh as Snowpaw hesitated again.

"I didn't say that," she finally meowed. "Although, it would just feel so *good* healing the Clan, rather than having to fight in battles."

I barely processed the words coming out of my sister's mouth. Was Snowpaw going to become a *medicine cat apprentice?* Surely not! We had been talking about becoming warriors together, going on patrols together, and fighting in battles side by side. She had changed her mind so quickly! *Has she been thinking about this for a while and just hasn't said anything? I don't know what I'll do if she decides that she doesn't want to be a warrior with me anymore...*

Just as I thought I was about to become overwhelmed with confusion and worry, I quietly sighed with relief as I realized that there would be no use for another medicine cat apprentice at the moment, with young Leafpool as the full medicine cat and would heal the Clan for seasons, and Jayfeather, who was her apprentice. *A third pair of paws would just get in the way!* I realized.

Snowpaw seemed to realize the same thing, and repeated my thoughts out loud, but not in the way I wanted to hear them. "I guess I'll have to wait until Jayfeather is a full medicine cat on his own," she murmured, half to herself. "Until then, I can just be ready to help Leafpool and Jayfeather if they need it!"

I couldn't suppress another gasp of complete dismay and surprise. Now it seemed like Snowpaw had completely decided that she wanted to train as a medicine cat apprentice!

# Chapter 12

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

"Snowpaw, have you got bees in your brain?" I asked my sister as the two of us padded back into camp from our training session of the day.

After Sorreltail and Brackenfur had finished their morning meal, they had taken Snowpaw and I out to teach us how to hunt for the first time. Although I had tried to focus as much as I could, and had even managed to catch my first mouse, I couldn't help but pester Snowpaw about her wanting to be a medicine cat whenever I got the chance.

I mean, the idea was completely mouse-brained, and I knew that! Who would want to be a medicine cat when you could become a *hero* and save your Clan from danger and trouble? I *knew* that Snowpaw wasn't thinking straight, so I had tried my hardest to get her to change her mind up until now.

As we were walking over to the apprentices den, she stopped and met my gaze after I had questioned her for the millionth time that day.

"Goldenpaw, for StarClan's sake!" Snowpaw hissed at me. "I can choose whatever path I want. I don't care if anyone disagrees with me!" She stomped her paw, almost as if to show if she was serious, before storming into the apprentices den.

As I watched her go, I couldn't help but sigh as my tail drooped. *I didn't mean to make her angry,* I thought. But... I suppose I had overreacted just a little bit. *Maybe I'm the one not thinking straight.*

I then shook my head slowly, looking down at the earth below me. *Snowpaw's right*, I realized. *She can choose whatever path she wants. But... I wanted her to be a warrior beside me. I wanted us to receive our*

*warrior names together. I might have to accept that that might not happen, as much as I don't have to like it.*

I began to follow Snowpaw into the medicine den, coming to terms with the tension the two of us were under. But, before I could crawl all the way into the den, I heard a voice come from close behind me.

"Goldenpaw, what's going on with with your sister?"

I whipped my head around to see my father, Thornclaw, looking back at me. He was lashing his tail curiously, and his eyes were filled with concern.

*Maybe Thornclaw can help Snowpaw to see sense!* I realized. *I can't completely lose hope!*

I turned to face my father, shrugging and rolling my eyes. "Snowpaw wants to be a medicine cat apprentice," I explained to him.

Thornclaw flicked his ears and nothing more, although I noticed a brief glint of shock in his pale blue eyes. "But why is she so angry about it?" He asked, his eyes narrowing.

I started to shift my paws from side to side as I realized that this conversation might not actually go the way I wanted it to.

I hesitated, not knowing how to justify my anger. *Who was I kidding?* I thought. *Thornclaw is a great father. He wouldn't make Snowpaw do something that she doesn't want to do just because I wanted him to.*

I took a deep breath, finally deciding to speak. "Well, I mighta sorta bugged her about it all day..." I trailed off as I saw a gleam of anger in Thornclaw's eyes. I felt my fur begin to bristle as I feared the stern talking to I was about to receive. But to my relief, Thornclaw closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I sighed with relief as I saw that when he opened his eyes again, his gaze was softer.

I couldn't help but feel a small wave of admiration for my father. Thornclaw was pretty well known for being short-tempered, but

*also* by how well that he could handle it. I wasn't too quick of temper myself, but I aspired to have as much self-control and patience as my father did.

"Goldenpaw," Thornclaw began, his voice even, "I can completely understand why this would upset you."

I flicked my ears and tilted my head. "Really? You do?" I asked as I began to lash my tail quickly back and forth.

"Yes, I do," Thornclaw answered. "Lilypetal and I love how close you and Snowpaw are, and we hope that it will always be this way-"

"It definitely will!" I insisted, cutting off Thornclaw, barely even realizing that I had.

But luckily Thornclaw didn't seem to mind, as he simply padded up to me and touched his muzzle to my head. "I have no doubt," he meowed even more softly. "But you must understand that you and Snowpaw can't always be side by side, as close as the two of you are."

As Thornclaw pulled his muzzle away from my head to simply look down at me, I couldn't help but let out a small whimper at his words. "But it's not fair!" I insisted. "Why did Snowpaw have to change her mind? This wasn't what we had planned."

I then felt Thornclaw wrap his tail around my back. "As much as we don't like it, sometimes that happens, Goldenpaw," Thornclaw explained. "Sometimes things don't go as planned. But you know what?"

I lifted my head up to meet my father's gaze. "What?" I asked, tilting my head once again.

"A part of being a warrior is being strong through change, and showing that despite how much some things that happen throw us off, we can get through it!" Thornclaw answered as he lightly poked my shoulder with his tail.

"A warrior," I breathed, my eyes widening. "Warriors do that?"

Thornclaw nodded, a purr rumbling in his throat as he saw how intrigued I looked. "All of the time," he responded, looking warmly down at me. "And I know that you can do the same."

"I definitely can!" I meowed, already feeling more uplifted by Thornclaw's words. *Whatever it takes to be the best warrior I can be!*

I was then pulled from my thoughts as my father gave me another nudge. "Another thing that warriors do," Thornclaw began once he had my gaze, "Is not make other cats feel badly for the paths that they want to take..."

I sighed, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with shame. *Yeah, that's definitely not what warriors do...*

"I... I know," I forced out, digging my head into Thornclaw's fur. "I don't know what I was thinking. I really need to apologize to Snowpaw..."

"And you will!" Thornclaw assured me. "But I wouldn't right now. You made it sound like you've been giving Snowpaw quite the hard time."

I shrugged, letting out a huff. "Yeah, I guess I have," I admitted. "I really, really have. What's wrong with me?"

Thornclaw purred with amusement. "Absolutely nothing is *wrong* with you," he insisted before licking my cheek. "You're stubborn, just like your father."

I stared at Thornclaw in confusion as he pulled his head away. "But... that's you!"

Thornclaw nodded, his eyes glowing with humor. "Precisely." As I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, Thornclaw stood up and began to pad over to the fresh-kill pile. "Let Snowpaw have some air for just a little while," he suggested. "For now, how about you and I grab something to eat?"

I nodded eagerly, excited to spend some more time with my father, which I had been worried I wouldn't get to do as much now that I was an apprentice. "Yes!" I exclaimed. "The stubborn cats will eat

together!"

As I trotted quickly over to join my father at the fresh-kill pile, Thornclaw let out another purr of amusement. "Let all cats stubborn enough to drive their kin crazy, gather at the fresh-kill pile for a meal!"

I fell to the ground and howled with laughter at Thornclaw's words as he picked up a shrew from the fresh-kill pile. I sighed as I was filled with ease, being able to forget all of my worries for just a little while as I sat down and shared a meal with my father.

# Chapter 13

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Hey, Lilypetal!"

I looked up at the voice that I heard to see that Brambleclaw was standing in front of me, his tail lashing back and forth.

I dropped my fresh-kill I had in my mouth to speak. "Hey, Brambleclaw!" I meowed kindly. "Did you need something?"

"I suppose I do!" Brambleclaw purred. "Well, Firestar, rather. He was wondering if you wanted to go to the gathering tonight? Maybe you and Squirrelflight can expose another cat?"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "StarClan forbid!" I exclaimed. "Hopefully it's not necessary."

I then realized the small pang of guilt that was tugging at me as I thought about the depth of those words. There definitely were things to expose, but they were only things that would hurt Brambleclaw, Squirrelflight, Leafpool, and her kin. But I wasn't going to do anything about it, I had already promised Squirrelflight that.

Pushing down my negative feelings, I dipped my head to the dark brown tabby. "Thank you for letting me know, Brambleclaw," I meowed. *And I'm sorry that I'm hiding so much from you...*

I forced a happy gaze as Brambleclaw gave me a small nod. "Sure," he murmured. I then watched as he turned around and began to pad over to Squirrelflight, who was taking her pick from the fresh-kill pile. I couldn't help but let out a shaky sigh as I watched the two of them touch noses. *Brambleclaw has no idea of all of the things that are going on inside his mate's head, all that she's keeping from him,* I realized sadly. *I don't know how Squirrelflight's been able to stand it*

*for so long.*

I then flicked my ears as my eyes fell on the fresh-kill pile, and I remembered that I had prey to drop off there. So, forcing down my sympathy and sadness, I bent my head down and picked up the chaffinch I had managed to catch, and tried to avoid looking at Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw as I padded over and dropped the prey down into the pile.

I then sat down in front of the pile, becoming very deep in thought. Unfortunately, as much as I could push down my sympathies for the ThunderClan deputy, that wasn't all that I could have to be sad about.

The hunting patrol I had just been out on with Cloudtail, Brightheart and Spiderleg had been tough. *Really* tough. It wasn't even close to leaf-bare yet, which was the scariest part about our lack of catches. But, prey had been scarce since the lake had begun to dry up about four moons ago. No cat yet had been able to give an explanation as to why this was happening, and all we knew was that it *was*.

The lake was slowly disappearing right in front of us.

Starting to grow anxious, I then shook my head quickly and took a deep breath. *Calm down,* I told myself. *Everything is going to be fine. And now that you're back to being a warrior, you can help out ThunderClan in so many ways!*

I decided that I might feel a little better if I picked up some prey and distributed it to the cats who weren't able to take the time to travel over to the pile. I picked up a vole and padded quickly over to the elders den.

"Ah, fresh-kill!" I heard Longtail say as I made my way into the den.

"Oh, yes!" I exclaimed through a mouth full of fresh-kill before dropping it in front of Longtail and Mousefur. "Here you go!"

I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as Mousefur let out an annoyed grunt. "It's about time!" The old she-cat murmured.

I rolled my eyes. *You're welcome!*

Longtail shot Mousefur a half-amused, half-warning glance before meeting my gaze and dipping his head. "Thank you, Lilypetal," he meowed.

I dipped my head to Longtail, thankful for his kindness before turning around and leaving the den. *Leave it to Longtail and Mousefur to make your day a little more interesting!*

I arrived back to the fresh-kill pile to pick up a squirrel for the nursery. *Which... is not my den anymore*, I thought sadly, still not having fully processed leaving the den after being in there for about eight moons.

Immediately as I crawled into the nursery, my head was practically flooded with memories. I suppressed a whimper, wishing more than anything at the moment that I could lie down in my old nest and have Snowpaw and Goldenpaw with me, nuzzling themselves into my fur.

Luckily, I was distracted as my gaze met Whitewing's kind eyes. I then averted my focus to what I was here to do.

"Hello, there!" I purred to Whitewing, dropping the squirrel at her paws. "You're going to need to eat if you want those little scraps of yours to have lots of milk!" I flicked my tail towards Ivykit and Dovekit, who looked like were in an intense game of mossball.

Whitewing stared lovingly at her two daughters for a few heartbeats before turning back to me. "You've got that right!" She agreed, bending her head down to take a bite. "Thank you."

"Sure," I meowed, dipping my head before scanning my gaze around the nursery. "Hey, where's Millie?" I then asked, realizing that the silver tabby might want some prey as well.

Whitewing nodded her head towards the nursery entrance. "Oh, she's just outside with Blossomkit, Bumblekit and Briarkit," the white she-cat answered. "And she just ate something, so you don't need to worry about her!"

"Alright, then!" I meowed before glancing out of the nursery entrance. I saw that the sun was beginning to sink the bottom of the sky, and the night creatures were beginning to make their usual cries. *ThunderClan is probably leaving for the Gathering at any moment now!* I realized.

I turned back to Whitewing, dipping my head to her once again. "Well, it's probably time that I head out. Time for another Gathering!"

"Ah, yes," Whitewing purred, flicking her tail towards the nursery entrance. "You go on then, but make sure you update me once you get the chance!"

"I definitely will!" I called back to the queen as I crawled out of the nursery den. *Great StarClan, I don't see how I could have ever have felt so negatively towards Whitewing at one point,* I realized, looking back to the time that I had once felt jealous of Whitewing, thinking that she and Thornclaw possibly had some sort of connection before he and I had become mates. *She has become one of my closest friends in this Clan, and I could not be more thankful for that.*

I let out a sigh of relief, realizing that I had succeeded in making myself feel a little better as I padded over to the group of gathering ThunderClan cats.

As I settled down next to Brackenfur and Sorreltail, I scanned my gaze around the camp. My eyes stopped to see that Millie was where Whitewing said that she was - sitting close to the nursery while her three kits played near some rocks. Berrynose and Honeyfern were just a couple of tail-lengths away, watching them. I looked away, purring with amusement as I had glanced at the kits' fun.

But almost immediately after, my breath caught in my throat as I realized that something had been off about what I saw.

*Hold on a moment...* I quickly whipped my head back to look at where the kits were, over by the rocks.

I then let out a hiss, unsheathing my claws as I noticed a long, dark

shape slithering its way right towards Brairkit.

# Chapter 14

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

My heart immediately began to beat at triple the speed as I watched the snake slowly make its way towards Millie's kit.

"No!" I yowled. And, without thinking, I began to charge towards the three kits. *No way am I letting a kit die from a snake today!*

I then gasped, skidding to a halt as I suddenly saw a flash of golden ginger fur, and I shook my head quickly to see that Honeyfern had gotten to Briarkit first, gently shoving her out of the way.

I sighed with relief. *Good, Brairkit is safe.*

But my ease didn't last long. Honeyfern may have shielded Briarkit from getting bitten, but Honeyfern herself was still in harm's way. I let out an anxious squeal as I watched the snake continue to slither towards the young she-cat. "Honeyfern, look out!"

But unfortunately, my warning had come just a moment too late. Just as I had been speaking, the fox-hearted snake had already fastened its small, but sharp teeth in Honeyfern's shoulder.

My mouth dropped and I was overwhelmed with dismay as I watched Honeyfern spring backward. "Help!" She screeched out helplessly.

*Oh my StarClan... no, no...*

I then flinched as I felt a cat brush my flank, and I averted my gaze to see Brackenfur and Sorreltail pelting towards their daughter, who was now lying on the ground, her paws splayed out. Berrynose was bending over his mate, his eyes full of fear and terror.

My heart nearly broke as I heard Sorreltail's shaky meow. "No... oh, no..." I heard her whisper as she dug her muzzle into Brackenfur's

shoulder. "I can't lose another kit! Not after Molekit! Please, StarClan..."

Just when I thought I couldn't bear to watch the scene unfolding in front of me anymore, I let out a small huff, being able to feel a bit of consolation as I noticed Leafpool quickly padding over to the group of cats.

"Stand back and give me some room," she ordered the cats surrounding Honeyfern.

"I'm not leaving," I heard Berrynose demand, and as I heard the plea in his voice, I found that my heart absolutely ached for the poor tom. I knew Berrynose to be quite the frustrating individual, but I certainly would never wish anything like this on him in a million moons.

I then watched as Leafpool began to hover over Honeyfern. I looked up to the sky. *Please StarClan, be with Honeyfern, and be with Leafpool too!* I prayed. *Leafpool must know what to do, and Honeyfern can't lose to this!*

I then found myself screwing my eyes shut, not being able to handle the pain in my heart as I heard Honeyfern's pained yowls. "Help me! My blood is on fire! Help me please! It hurts so much!"

Almost as if Thornclaw had sensed my need for comfort, I suddenly felt a pelt brush against mine, and I turned to see the familiar golden pelt of my mate. I let out a small whimper before digging my head into Thornclaw's chest. *Please StarClan, please...* I told my warrior ancestors as I felt Thornclaw wrap his tail around my shoulders.

"Do something!" I heard Berrynose beg, I assumed to Leafpool. "One of you, do something!"

More silence fell over the camp after Berrynose's words. As curious as I was to see what was happening, I found that I couldn't pull my head away from Thornclaw's chest.

I finally forced myself to lift my head as I then heard Sorreltail's

yowl. "Why aren't you doing anything?"

"I'm so sorry," I could then just barely hear Leafpool's whisper. "There is nothing I can do. The poison has taken hold of her."

For one of the first times in my whole life, I felt as if my heart had physically broken as I heard Sorreltail's anguished yowl. This was the first death I had experienced since joining ThunderClan, and even though that was a fair gap of time, it still felt too soon.

Several heartbeats went by as the Clan fell silent, beginning to grieve for their lost Clanmate. I could slightly hear the whispers of Honeyfern's kin as they gave her their last words and said their goodbyes.

The first words that I could hear clearly after that were Leafpool's. "Find some warriors to help carry her body into the clearing," she commanded to Lionblaze, and I watched as Lionblaze then beckoned Spiderleg and Thornclaw over. Thornclaw met my gaze, briefly touched his nose to mine, and then padded over to help his fellow warriors.

As I let my gaze fall on Thornclaw as he traveled, I heard Leafpool speak again. "We need to get her away from the cliff in case the snake is still around."

My ears flicked at these words, and I felt all of the sadness flowing through me suddenly vanish.

*The snake*, I said to myself, whipping my head around the clearing. *Where is the snake?*

Without even realizing it, I found that I was beginning to pad over to the area of Honeyfern's death, passing Spiderleg, Hollyleaf, Thornclaw and Lionblaze as they carried Honeyfern's body.

I then stopped in my tracks as I saw a familiar creature whipping around in the rocks. The one who had taken my Clanmate's life just heartbeats ago. I let out a hiss as I realized that this snake was still lingering around the rocks.

Anger immediately bubbled inside of me, *sheer* anger that I hadn't

felt many times in my life. The type that almost makes you lose your mind, and it impairs your judgment. Yes, it was that bad.

When I was a kittypet back in the old forest, before I had arrived here at the lake, I had lost one of my kittypet friends to an adder, which actually happened to be one of the other moments I had experience where I felt as if my heart had physically broken. The kittypet, McGee, a black and white she-cat, had decided to take a try at hunting one morning. Me and a few other friends decided to wait for her atop one of our fences, excited to see if she was going to be successful in her expedition out into the forest.

We had begun to grow quite anxious as we realized that nearly half the day had passed, and McGee hadn't returned. Just moments later, we had been baffled to see McGee dragging herself from the forest, too weak to even stand up. I had been the one to leap over to her and find the all-too familiar snake bite on one of her hind legs. My friends and I had then gathered around McGee, watching her as she took her final breath.

It was now clear to me that after watching this snake take Honeyfern's life, it felt like I was re-living McGee's death all over again. I not only felt grief for Honeyfern, but the grief I had felt for McGee suddenly felt fresh all over again. And all of this grief was here just because of a sick, horrible, awful creature. A *snake*.

Probably making one of the most impulsive decisions ever, I let out a growl in rage and pounced at the snake, my claws out.

"Lilypetal, no!" I heard Thornclaw yowl behind me.

I ignored my mate's yowl and landed right in front of the snake, not wanting to turn back even a little bit. I tried to push back my fear as I watched the creature slither around me. I bit my tongue, holding back a yelp as it eventually snapped at my leg, but by StarClan's blessing I'm sure, I managed to lift it at the same moment.

I gasped as the snake then slithered behind me and started climbing up my back, just within a heartbeat. Trying not to let panic get the best of me, I started to spin around and I let out a huff of

satisfaction as the snake was flung away from me, landing hard at the side of the rock.

Letting out a yowl of determination, I ran over to the creature, dug my claws into its back and gave it one last blow to the head. The snake managed one last hiss, but just after a few heartbeats, the snake let out an eerie shudder and died, its long body going limp.

I sighed, letting myself sit down where I was in exhaustion. *I have avenged you, Honeyfern,* I told her in my mind, not sure if she was able to hear me yet. *And in a way, I feel like I have avenged McGee as well, after all this time.*

"Lilypetal, that was awesome!" Goldenpaw yowled out as I tried to catch my breath. I then heard quick footsteps approaching me, and the next thing I knew, she was pressing her flank against mine.

Thornclaw came right behind her, stopping right in front of me to sniff at my fur. "Did the snake bite you?" Thornclaw asked, his voice shaking with desperation.

I immediately shook my head, making sure that Thornclaw wasn't panicking for even a moment longer. "No, don't worry," I reassured him, running my tail along his flank. "It barely missed my leg, though."

I then twitched my tail tip back and forth anxiously. *I may have killed this snake, but I certainly don't want to be named cat of the day,* I thought, beckoning Thornclaw and Goldenpaw to follow me over to where Honeyfern was now lying in the middle of camp. Much of the Clan was wailing in grief at the young she-cat's death, what happened to me didn't matter right now.

As I settled down in the main camp clearing, Thornclaw on one side of me and Goldenpaw on the other, I saw my other kit, Snowpaw pad up to me with her eyes wide. I was shocked to see that her pale blue eyes, that were usually gentle, were overcome with rage.

"How *stupid* does a cat get?" Snowpaw hissed as she stopped to stand in front of me. "Mother, what were you thinking?"

"I could definitely ask you the same question!" Thornclaw exclaimed next to me, lightly nudging my shoulder.

"Me too!" Goldenpaw meowed, trotting up to stand next to Snowpaw. "As brave as it was, it was *dangerous*."

I didn't feel wretched by Snowpaw's words, or any of them in fact, despite how shocking it was to see the usually calm she-cat angry. I bent my head down slightly to touch my muzzle to her head before moving my head to meet the gaze of everyone in my family.

"I know, that was pretty stupid," I admitted, "I'm sorry that I scared you all."

"I think I'm going to dig a hole, throw you into it and trap you inside," Thornclaw murmured in a half-amused, half-irritated tone, "So that I can make sure you never do anything like that again!"

I managed to let out a purr of amusement, something that hadn't happened for quite a while that day. And I was about to give my mate another teasing response when suddenly I noticed Leafpool approaching out of the corner of my eye.

"You need to wash your paws in the stream," the medicine cat commanded to me once she was a tail-length in front of me. "Some of the snake's poison may have gotten on your fur. *Don't lick your paws*."

I dipped my head to the tabby-and-white she-cat. "Sure thing," I murmured. *Don't lick your paws, Lilypetal. Do. Not. Lick. Your. Paws.*

I kept repeating this over and over in my head as Firestar leaped to his spot on the Highledge.

"Cats of ThunderClan!" he began, raising his voice for every cat in the hollow to hear. "A dreadful thing has happened, but we must stay calm. Honeyfern died a warrior's death, protecting a kit of her Clan."

I bowed my head down as I was overwhelmed with grief for Honeyfern all over again, I could see many cats around me doing the same.

Firestar continued. "The cats staying behind will grieve for Honeyfern, but we must *all* grieve for her and have a Clan vigil after the Gathering," he meowed solemnly.

ThunderClan muttered around, their voices full of uncertainty, but... we couldn't *not* go to the gathering. It would go against StarClan, surely?

"Once we return, we will take action to make sure that *no* snake comes to hurt any other cats from those rocks," Firestar commanded.

"Thanks to Lilypetal, one of those snakes is gone!" Goldenpaw exclaimed beside me.

My eyes widened as I whipped my head around to look at my daughter. "Goldenpaw, hush!" I hissed at her. The last thing I wanted right now was for the attention to be brought on me.

Luckily, Goldenpaw's words were blown over quickly, as some cats gave me nods of gratitude before looking back up at Firestar. I myself looked up to the ThunderClan to see that he was staring down at me.

"And we thank her for that," Firestar meowed, giving me a brief nod before looking up at the blackening sky. "It's time that we begin travel to the Gathering. Let's go!"

Cats around the clearing exchanged reluctant glances as they began to follow Firestar through the gorse tunnel. I trailed side by side with Thornclaw pretty far behind the group. I glanced back briefly to see that Goldenpaw and Snowpaw were watching us go, their eyes filled with a mix of shock and denial.

*Me too, my loves,* I thought before turning my head to look forward. *The hits just keep on coming, don't they?* I wondered sadly as I finally crawled through the gorse tunnel.

# Chapter 15

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Lilypetal," I heard Firestar's yowl come from the front of the traveling cats. "Could you come up here, please?"

*Oh, no. I wonder what this is about?* I asked myself as I lightly shouldered through ThunderClan cats to join Firestar beside him.

"Hi, Firestar! Did you need something?" I asked the ThunderClan leader in a friendly voice.

Firestar turned his head to meet my gaze. "It was brave of you to take on that snake," Firestar meowed, giving me a brief nod.

"Oh, goodness," I meowed back, still not enjoying the fact that me killing the snake brought some of the attention of the ordeal towards me. "Well, thank you, Firestar. I only did what I felt like I had to do."

"You typically do, don't you?" Firestar teased, and after I purred with amusement, he went on. "I remember back when I was an apprentice in the old forest, Ravenpaw - you know of Ravenpaw, right?"

I nodded, trying to recall in my mind what I knew about the black tom. Ravenpaw had been a former ThunderClan apprentice, but Firestar and Graystripe had had to send him to a Twoleg farm, away from ThunderClan. Tigerstar, his mentor at the time, would've killed him so that Ravenpaw would keep quiet about Tigerstar killing Redtail, a former ThunderClan deputy. But as far as I had heard, Ravenpaw was much happier living at the barn with his dear friend, Barley, assisting any cats who needed their help.

"Oh, I know Ravenpaw!" I purred. "He seems wonderful from what I've heard. I know Clan cats have taken shelter in his barn

numerous times, and he was even the one to send my mother this way when she was finding her way back to the Clans!"

Firestar's green eyes glittered with fondness as he thought back to his old friend. "He certainly is a cat like no other, and such a true friend. Anyway," Firestar went on, "When Ravenpaw was an apprentice, he once killed an adder at Snakerocks. He came back to camp with the creature right in his jaws! I have to say, I was very surprised. Adders are very dangerous, and Ravenpaw wasn't the bravest cat at the time."

"Did he? Wow!" I exclaimed after Firestar had finished his story. "Well, I'm glad to be able to say that I'm following in Ravenpaw's pawprints!"

Not too long after Firestar and I's conversation, ThunderClan arrived at the island, the tree bridge sitting there, waiting for us. Firestar and Brambeclaw hopped onto the large log first and the rest of the Clan followed right behind them.

I flicked my ears as I noticed that the other Clans were already at the island. Leopardstar, Onestar, and Blackstar were sitting on their branches of the large oak tree. Firestar padded forward and leaped onto his branch to join them.

Leopardstar, the RiverClan leader, watched Firestar settle himself in before turning to face the gathered cats, letting out a yowl. "The Gathering has begun," she announced, her voice ringing across the clearing. "RiverClan will report first. Prey is running well. Mistyfoot, Reedwhisker, and Rainstorm drove a fox out of our territory."

As Leopardstar then stepped back, allowing Blackstar to speak, I realized that I had never washed my paws. *I haven't licked them, have I?* I asked myself. Praying to StarClan that I hadn't done it without thinking, I quietly slithered out of the crowd to pad towards the lake. I tried to keep one ear open just in case I was missing any important information from the Gathering.

I stopped once I was right at the edge of the island, right beside the water. I put my forepaws into the water and rubbed them together

for a heartbeats.

Once I felt satisfied, I lifted one of my paws up for me to look at as I nodded sharply. *There!*

When I arrived back, Onestar had just finished speaking, and was stepping back to his spot on the branch. Now, it was Firestar's turn.

The ThunderClan leader stepped forward.

"Unfortunately, ThunderClan faced some tragedy just before we left for this Gathering," Firestar began solemnly. "A snake has taken the life of one of our young warriors, Honeyfern."

Some shocked murmurs and gasps came from the gathered cats, and lots of them lowered their heads with grief. Many cats loved and respected the optimistic, kind she-cat.

Firestar lowered his head for a few heartbeats before going on. "Honeyfern died bravely, saving one of ThunderClan's kits, Briarkit," I then flinched as Firestar nodded his head towards me. "One of our other warriors, Lilypetal, courageously killed the snake to avenge Honeyfern."

I then felt as if I had to look down at my paws as some cats from the other Clans looked at me, giving me murmurs of praise and nodding their heads. I simply gave them warm looks, praying to StarClan that Firestar would beginning speaking again as soon as possible.

Luckily, I didn't have to deal with the attention for very long. "We will grieve for Honeyfern tonight," Firestar announced. "Besides that-"

"Wait!"

I let out a quiet gasp as a familiar voice came from the crowd. I exchanged a glance with Brightheart and Birchfall, who I was sitting next to, before trying to peer over the crowd of cats to see who had spoken. *Full-moon Gatherings these past moons have been quite interesting, haven't they?* I thought. *I wonder what's going on this time?*

I scanned the clearing for a few heartbeats, and I thought that I felt my heart skip a beat when I saw Hollyleaf just a few fox-lengths away, Lionblaze nudging at her, as if to tell her to be quiet.

My heart was *pounding*. I couldn't have known for sure what Hollyleaf was going to say, but I grew increasingly more nervous as my mind came up with a possibility.

I then watched as Hollyleaf hissed something to her brother before standing tall and looking around at all of the cats in the clearing. "You think you-"

"Hollyleaf!" I flinched at Firestar's sharp call. "If you have anything important to say here, it should have been discussed with me first. Be silent now, and whatever's troubling you, I'll talk to you about it tomorrow."

I tried to keep my breath steady as I looked down at the ground. *I would much prefer that myself.*

My mouth dropped at what Hollyleaf said next. "No!" She insisted, gasps of shock rippling around her. "I *will* speak now!"

I was so tempted to pelt over to the black she-cat and give her a good cuff over the ear. I was shocked that Hollyleaf was speaking to kin, let alone her *leader*, like that.

"Yes, let her speak," I heard Leopardstar meow, and I looked up to see that she had stepped forward on her branch. "I'd like to hear what she has to say."

*I really don't know if you do.*

"So would I," Onestar agreed.

*I'm not sure about that.*

"Or has ThunderClan got secrets that they're too scared to reveal?" I heard Blackstar taunt, narrowing his eyes towards Firestar.

I then let out a startled yelp as yowling broke out among the clearing, cats clearly challenging ThunderClan and their supposed

"secrets". I turned my head over to look at Hollyleaf to see that she looked oddly serene. *Maybe... she isn't going to do what I think she is?* I thought hopefully.

Firestar finally raised his tail for silence. "Very well, Hollyleaf," the ThunderClan leader meowed warily. "Say what you have to. And StarClan grant you don't regret it."

*I second that,* I said in my head as I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what was to come.

The island fell completely silent as Hollyleaf began to speak, so silent that I almost thought that the cats close to me would be able to hear my heartbeat.

"You think you know me," the ThunderClan warrior began. "And my brothers, Lionblaze and Jayfeather of ThunderClan."

I screwed my eyes shut. *Oh my StarClan, this is actually happening,* I thought in panic. At this point, I couldn't be more sure of what Hollyleaf was going to announce, right here in front of all four Clans.

"You think you know us," Hollyleaf went on, "but everything you have been told about us is a lie! We are not the kits of Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight!"

*Well, I think that me possibly having licked my paws with snake poison on them is the least of my problems now.*

# Chapter 16

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

*I never got to know you, Honeyfern*, I said in my mind to the ginger she-cat, digging my muzzle into her cold fur. *But I can tell that you were the type of warrior that I aspire to be.*

I then pulled away, leaving Honeyfern to be with cats dearest to her. Cinderheart had gone to the gathering, but Sorreltail, Brackenfur, Poppyfrost, and Berrynose had stayed to grieve for their loved one.

I watched the gathered cats for a few moments, my heart practically breaking for them. But, I had to be thankful that I wasn't there with them, fighting my own immense grief.

*Watching Lilypetal leap at that snake was one of the most heart-stopping things I have ever witnessed*, I realized to myself. *Thank StarClan that she isn't there lying beside Honeyfern right now.* I shook my head quickly, pushing that vision away as I settled down just a few tail-lengths from where the vigil was happening. I could barely stand even the thought.

As I sat near the main camp clearing, trying to clear my head, I suddenly realized that Snowpaw wasn't anywhere in sight. Usually around this time of day, she and I would sit and talk near the apprentices den, discussing our day of training and whatever else. *After Honeyfern's vigil started and ThunderClan left for the Gathering, she just kind of disappeared out of thin air, didn't she?*

I then flicked my ears and rolled my eyes as I thought that I knew where the white she-cat might be.

Letting out an annoyed huff, I turned around and stomped straight towards the medicine cat den. *I should've suspected this as soon as I realized she was missing!* I thought frustratedly.

It's not like this was new. Ever since the day that Snowpaw had confessed to me that she was interested in becoming a medicine cat apprentice, she would take every opportunity she could to help out Jayfeather or Leafpool. She was still training as a warrior apprentice, and would go out with Sorreltail, Brackenfur and I each day. But, almost immediately after we would get back, she would pelt over to the medicine den to see if there was anything that she could do. She would even attempt to collect herbs when we were out in the forest every once in a while.

"Oh, thyme!" She exclaimed one morning as we followed Brackenfur and Sorreltail to our usual training clearing.

I had rolled my eyes as she padded over to the thyme bush, beginning to collect some. "I think that it's *thyme* for you to get your priorities straight," I had muttered to her.

Another day, she had actually paused *mid*-practice-fight when she caught sight of yarrow nearby.

"Oh! Hold on a moment, I see yarrow!" She exclaimed, leaping off of me and trotting quickly over to the bush where the herbs were.

"*Yarrow* getting on my last nerve!" I had growled, letting myself flop over onto my side.

If it wasn't clear enough already, Snowpaw's shenanigans had been driving me absolutely insane in the recent moons. We were going to be warriors very soon, and I wondered what Snowpaw was going to do about that when she seemed to have such a passion for being a medicine cat.

*The situation is still the same*, I told myself as I peered my head into the medicine den. *Leafpool and Jayfeather don't need any help. Snowpaw is still out of luck!*

As I predicted, Snowpaw was in the medicine den.

I groaned with annoyance. "Snowpaw, what are you doing?" I demanded, making my way into the medicine den to join her. "In case you have forgotten, this isn't your den."

Snowpaw didn't avert her gaze from her work. "I thought Jayfeather and Leafpool would maybe like it if I sorted their herbs for them," she answered cheerfully. "I overheard them saying earlier that their den was a mess!"

I just sighed, shook my head, and left the den. "Good luck dealing with Jayfeather once he comes back to find an apprentice in his den!" I called back to my sister after arriving back in the clearing.

Not knowing what to do with myself while I waited for ThunderClan to return from the Gathering, I scanned around the camp, my eyes briefly resting on the continuing vigil, before my eyes fell on Mousewhisker, who was pacing a little ways away from the vigil.

I decided to pad over to my Clanmate, who I had befriended just a couple of moons before. The two of us had been on the dawn patrol together along with Brackenfur and Hazeltail, and we had immediately hit it off. By the time we had arrived at the ShadowClan border to put our scent markers down, I was already exhausted by how much I had been laughing. Since then, we shared a piece of prey every once in a while to just talk and joke around. Now, I considered him one of my closest friends in the Clan.

*And there's nothing romantic about it, which makes it even nicer!* I realized as I nodded to the white and gray tom. I then settled down, watching him continue to pace.

"Decided that you wanted to wear out your paws tonight?" I joked as Mousewhisker finally stopped pacing and settled down beside me.

Mousewhisker let out a sigh. "I suppose so," he murmured, looking down at his paws. "Anything to get my mind off of today."

I gazed at my friend sympathetically before wrapping my tail across his shoulders. "I get it," I breathed, leaning my head on his shoulder. "I'm sure some cats would bang their heads against a tree if it meant that they could get their mind off of today."

Mousewhisker purred with amusement, standing up. "Okay, you go

find a tree then," he meowed, "I'll meet you there, and then I'll just screw my eyes shut while you grab my scruff and throw me against it!"

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, pushing down Mousewhisker's haunches with one of my paws. "Sit down, you stupid furball!" I exclaimed, purring. "Don't be silly. We wouldn't want to harm the trees like that!"

The both of us howled with laughter. I then sighed, glancing over at the camp entrance. "I kind of wish I had been chosen to go to the Gathering tonight," I murmured to Mousewhisker.

"Me too!" Mousewhisker agreed, his voice continuing to sound a little brighter. "Do you think we're missing anything interesting?"

I shrugged and let out a small grunt. "I have no idea!" I responded, looking up at the moon that was high in the sky. "It's gotten pretty late... hopefully they're not standing around yelling at each other."

# Chapter 17

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

I couldn't suppress a startled hiss as yowls of shock rippled among the Clan cats. "Oh, no no no..." I muttered just loudly enough for myself to hear. *This secret was supposed to stay with me, Leafpool, and Squirrelflight! Now all four Clans know that these ThunderClan cats have been living a lie.*

I then whipped my head quickly over to Hollyleaf, who was simply watching the reactions unfolding in front of her. *Why did you do this? What did you expect to happen?*

Among all of the voices merging together on the island, one stuck out more than the others. My heart sank as I caught Brambleclaw's voice come from bottom of the tree where the deputies sat.

"What?" He meowed sharply, getting up to his paws. "Squirrelflight, why is she talking such nonsense?"

I let out a sigh, looking down to the ground and shaking my head. *I figured that Brambleclaw would find out about this at some point, or Squirrelflight would decide to tell him*, I admitted to myself. *But I didn't want it to happen this way...*

I then looked over to Squirrelflight, who was quite a few tail-lengths from me. She looked as if four badgers were standing right in front of her. Then, her gaze softened, and her green eyes seemed to be filled with nothing but sadness.

*Is she going to admit it?* I wondered, my tail twitching anxiously.

"I'm sorry, Brambleclaw, but it's true," the dark ginger she-cat forced out. "I'm not their mother, and you are not their father."

My stomach twisted as I then looked back at Brambleclaw. His

amber gaze was burning into Squirrelflight's. "Then who is?" He demanded.

I suddenly felt the impulse to run up to Squirrelflight and stand at her side. I was too nervous to look directly into her gaze, but I simply padded up to stand beside her, my fur lightly brushing against hers.

I watched as Squirrelflight turned to face Hollyleaf, whose green eyes were glittering with pride.

"Tell them, Hollyleaf," she meowed clearly to the cat that she had claimed as her daughter for moons and moons. "I kept the secret for seasons; I'm not going to reveal it now."

"Coward!" Hollyleaf barked back at Squirrelflight before sweeping her gaze around the clearing once again. I unsheathed my claws and dug them into the ground. As much as I wanted to stop Hollyleaf from causing more harm than she already had, I knew that the damage was already done.

"I'm not afraid of the truth!" Hollyleaf went on. "Leafpool is our mother, and Crowfeather - yes, Crowfeather of WindClan - is our father."

I let out a gasp and shut my eyes. *Well... that's that.*

As Hollyleaf shouted these words, more yowls of surprise rose up in the clearing. "These cats were so ashamed of us that they gave us away and lied to every single one of you to hide the fact that they had broken the warrior code." I then felt another pang in my stomach as Hollyleaf lashed her tail over to where Leafpool was sitting with the medicine cats. "It's all her fault. How can the Clans survive when there are cowards and liars at the very heart of them?"

I didn't think that it was possible, but the yowls and gasps among the Clans managed to grow even louder. I found that my heart felt as if it was almost physically in pain. It was hurting for Squirrelflight and Leafpool, and although it had been their choice to keep this secret for so long, I couldn't imagine the amount of loss

and grief they were feeling at the moment.

A new voice was able to make itself heard among the crowd, and I almost immediately recognized Crowfeather. *Great StarClan, what will he have to say about this?*

"It's not true!" He insisted, his gray-black fur bristling, turning to face Breezepelt and Nightcloud. "She's the one who's lying!"

I then turned my head back towards the large oak tree as I noticed that Leafpool was standing up. I almost could hear the crack of my heart breaking as I saw the immense amount of sorrow in her amber eyes.

"It's true, Crowfeather," she meowed, her gaze meeting her former mate's. "I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you, but there was never a right time."

I looked back at Crowfeather, anxious to hear his response.

"You mean nothing to me, Leafpool," the WindClan tom meowed coldly. "That moon has passed. My loyalty is only to WindClan, and I have no kits other than Breezepelt."

I then had to try my hardest to suppress a hiss, my claws continuing to dig into the ground. *That mangy...* I thought angrily. *Maybe there is a coward among us.*

I then turned back to Leafpool, having had to move my head back and forth as if I was watching a game of mossball. Leafpool was dipping her head, proceeding to turn her head to look up at Firestar. My heart felt like it was breaking a second time at the tabby-and-white she-cat's next words.

"I know that I cannot be ThunderClan's medicine cat any longer," she meowed. "I'm so sorry to you, Firestar, and to all my Clanmates. Please know that I tried my best, and regretted what I had done with every single breath." She paused, swallowing before she continued. "But I couldn't regret having my kits. They are fine cats, and I will always be proud of them."

The Clan then watched in silence as Leafpool took one last glance at

Crowfeather before padding across the clearing, away from the crowd of cats, and then out of sight.

*Poor, poor Leafpool,* I thought as I watched her disappear. I then turned my head as more movement came from the edge of the clearing, and I nearly gasped as I saw Brambleclaw approaching Squirrelflight, who was still next to me.

The ThunderClan deputy's eyes were filled with hurt as he meowed, "Why?"

"I had to!" Squirrelflight meowed desperately. "She's my sister!"

"And you couldn't trust me?" Brambleclaw questioned, his voice shaking. I could barely stand to look at him as he spoke, so I moved my head to look at Squirrelflight, who simply stared back at her mate without flinching. *Is she not going to speak for herself?* I wondered.

When Squirrelflight continued to not reply, I turned back to Brambleclaw just in time to watch him almost come to a conclusion, his eyes now glowing with betrayal and disappointment. "You couldn't trust me," he repeated. "Don't you think I would have helped you, if you'd told me the truth? But it's too late now."

Through my surprise, I barely realized that my mouth had dropped open. *No!* I pleaded to Brambleclaw in my head. *Let her explain!* But in that same instant, Brambleclaw turned away from Squirrelflight without another word.

"Brambleclaw-" Squirrelflight called, beginning to follow after her former mate, but my eyebrows raised as I watched her almost immediately pause, hanging her head low to the ground. I looked down at her and then let my gaze look after Brambleclaw, who was shouldering a path through the crowd.

*This can't happen!* I thought. *If only Brambleclaw knew how difficult this was for her, how much she* wanted *to tell him!*

I then found myself following after the dark brown tabby tom. *This*

*secret being revealed has turned a lot of things completely upside down,* I thought angrily. *But if there's a part of it that can be fixed, I might as well try at it, right?*

I chased after Brambleclaw. "Brambleclaw, wait!"

To my luck, Brambleclaw turned to face me as soon as I had called him. I could see that he was trying to appear strong and stoic, but his eyes clearly gave away the hurt and betrayal he was feeling. "What?" He rasped in a voice just barely above a whisper.

"Can I please talk to you for a moment?" I asked, kneading my paws into the ground.

Brambleclaw rolled his eyes. "I know what this is about," he meowed bitterly. "And your attempt isn't going to work, Lilypetal. You can't convince me to forgive Squirrelflight when she's *lied* to me for *seasons*."

I sighed. "I know, I know," I muttered. "But-"

"What do you mean?" Brambleclaw demanded, taking a step closer to me with his eyes narrowed. "You've *known*?"

"That doesn't matter now," I insisted, shaking my head quickly. "Brambleclaw listen, I'm not here to fall to the ground and beg you to take Squirrelflight back-"

"Hm, you might as well," Brambleclaw muttered, looking away from me. "It would just be another addition to the dramatics of this Gathering."

I ignored the tom's bitter tone, returning to what I had been saying. "I'm not asking you to forgive her," I repeated. "I just want you to know how difficult this was for Squirrelflight. Trust me, I wouldn't like the idea of my mate hiding a secret like that from me, either..." I hesitated, and then continued to speak. "But... Squirrelflight only did what she thought she had to do to protect her sister."

When Brambleclaw didn't respond, I went on, shifting my paws back and forth on the ground. "If you want to hold a grudge against her, I can understand that. She *did* lie to you," I murmured. "But... I

just thought that I would try. Squirrelflight would need your support now more than ever."

Then deciding that I should probably just leave Brambleclaw with his thoughts, I simply gave him a nod and turned away from the tabby tom to try and find Squirrelflight. But my ears flicked up as I heard Brambleclaw's voice calling back to me.

"Lilypetal..."

I paused and turned my head around to look at Brambleclaw, who was slowly padding up to me. "Yes?"

He seemed to have predicted where I was going. "Can... can I come with you?"

I raised my eyebrows at the Clan deputy. "Really?" I questioned him. "Are you sure?"

Brambleclaw hesitated for a few heartbeats before nodding and answering simply, "Yes, let's go."

I couldn't help but well up with pride. *Words can really be powerful if you use them the right way...* I realized. *That has been proven many times tonight already!*

"Okay," I whispered to Brambleclaw as I began to walk again. "Let's go."

# Chapter 18

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

I was filled with a mix of relief, apprehension and anxiety as I began shouldering my way through cats, looking for Squirrelflight with Brambleclaw still right behind me.

At this point, the Gathering was definitely over, but after what had just happened, many cats were too shaken to even move from their spots, standing around and gossiping with their Clanmates.

Among the crowd, Squirrelflight's dark ginger pelt was easy to spot. Once my gaze had landed on her, I paused and looked back at Brambleclaw once again, he looked wary, but his eyes glowed with certainty.

*He wants to forgive her, I can tell*, I thought. *I mean, he still* loves *Squirrelflight.*

We both padded up to Squirrelflight to find her slightly secluded from the rest of the gathered cats, pacing back and forth with her head down to the ground.

I stared at her sympathetically as I settled down. *I can't even imagine all of the things that must be running through her head right now...*

I looked back once again, and saw that Brambleclaw was still right on my tail. He sat down beside me, watching Squirrelflight as she traveled from side to side. It was then that I realized that Squirrelflight hadn't even noticed we were there yet.

Just as I had been about to open my mouth to get the she-cat's attention, Squirrelflight's head whipped over to where Brambleclaw and I were sitting, her eyes widening as she stopped in her tracks. She looked bewildered at the fact that Brambleclaw was beside me.

"B-Brambleclaw?" She whispered, padding up to us, her eyes filled with shame. "What is it? What more could you *possibly* want to do with me?"

I turned to Brambleclaw as I heard him sigh, and saw that he was forcing himself to meet Squirrelflight's gaze. I stayed silent, and even backed away a few pawsteps, knowing that this was a conversation that could only progress and be accomplished with the two of them.

"If you're coming over here to give me a hard time, don't waste your breath," Squirrelflight hissed when Brambleclaw hesitated. "I've lost enough already. I can't take any more."

I flicked my ears as Brambleclaw stood up. "Listen, Squirrelflight," the dark tabby tom meowed, his voice clear, "I am hurt. *Really* hurt. You must understand that I can't help but feel betrayed by what you did-"

"I know this already!" Squirrelflight growled, turning away from Brambleclaw's gaze. "I don't need to hear it again."

"I'm not finished," Brambleclaw meowed, veering around Squirrelflight so that he could face her again. "I... I really wish that you had told me about this moons ago, but..."

Squirrelflight lifted her head from where it had been lowered, flicking her ears. "But... what?" She murmured, her tail beginning to twitch.

"But I understand your reasons," Brambleclaw meowed more softly. He hesitated a few more moments before whispering, "I just... I just need some time to adjust to this. You can understand that, right?"

I couldn't help but let out a small purr as I watched Squirrelflight sigh with relief. "It's what I deserve," she murmured, shaking her head slowly. "Take all of the time you need, Brambleclaw." She then looked as if she was holding back a whimper. "I'm so sorry."

I continued to purr as Brambleclaw touched his nose to Squirrelflight's before turning away from her to join where

ThunderClan was beginning to gather. As he passed me, he met my gaze and put the tip of his tail on my shoulder briefly. I turned my head and watched him walk away for a few heartbeats, then turning to pad back to Squirrelflight.

Squirrelflight was watching me as I approached her, her eyes wide. I couldn't help but purr at her bewildered glance.

"I don't know what you said to him," Squirrelflight murmured once I had settled in front of her, "But thank you, Lilypetal."

I shrugged, touching Squirrelflight's nose to mine. "I just told him the truth," I meowed. "You did what you had to do, and I made sure that he knew that."

Squirrelflight nodded, her gaze welling up with ease. "Thank you," she breathed. "Really. Leafpool and I-"

My ears pricked up at Squirrelflight's words. "Leafpool!" I blurted out. "Where is she?" I recalled that she had left right in front of every cat's eyes during the Gathering, but where in StarClan's name could she be now?

I could barely hear Squirrelflight's response, my ears roaring as I began to scan the clearing. *And Hollyleaf!* I thought to myself as I realized that the fluffy black she-cat had disappeared as well. I suddenly was overwhelmed with anxiety all over again, knowing that everything that Hollyleaf had done tonight had been driven by anger - being lied to and manipulated over and over for her whole life. I would be shocked if this announcement at the Gathering was her only course of action.

I nearly flinched as a tail tip placed itself on my shoulder, and I whipped my head back around to meet Squirrelflight's gaze. "Lilypetal, it's alright," Squirrelflight meowed softly. "I'm sure Leafpool just went out to clear her head, and she'll return to camp once she's ready."

I shook my head as Squirrelflight was speaking. "Sure, but what about Hollyleaf?" I responded. "If she had thought her motives were fulfilled, she would have stayed right here, wouldn't she?"

I watched Squirrelflight's eyes widen as the two of us began to pad over to join ThunderClan, who was finally gathering together to leave the island. Many cats were still murmuring to each other out of the shock of the situation. I could just barely see Firestar at the front as he began to lead his Clan to camp. He seemed very preoccupied and deep in thought. *Well, he did just find out that his daughters have been hiding this secret for so long now,* I thought. *It's crazy, on our way here the two of us were talking about adders...*

Squirrelflight interrupted my thoughts, going back to the accusation I had made. "You... you could be right..." Squirrelflight muttered, the fear filling up in her green eyes all over again.

I raised my eyebrows as Squirrelflight then gasped and lashed her tail, as if some other thought had occurred in her mind. I tried to keep up with her as she suddenly quickened her pace.

"Come on, Lilypetal," she meowed sharply once ThunderClan had arrived in their own territory. "Let's go find Leafpool, and make sure she's safe."

# Chapter 19

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

"Get out!"

I was still talking with Mousewhisker when I suddenly heard a screech come from the medicine cat den. I immediately gasped, wondering what could've gone so horribly wrong for a cat to let out a yowl.

I exchanged an anxious glance with Mousewhisker, before looking back at the medicine den to see Snowpaw practically fly out of the den as if she had been *thrown*.

Without a word, I began running over to my sister, but stopped as I heard Mousewhisker's footsteps following closely behind.

"It's okay, Mousewhisker," I insisted to my friend. "I can see what's the matter."

Mousewhisker's eyes then looked as if they were going to pop out of his head. "Are you kidding me?" The gray and white tom exclaimed. "Your sister just got thrown from the medicine den! Is Jayfeather back and we didn't even notice?"

A shiver ran down my spine. *As much as Jayfeather* would *do that, I don't think he could ever truly bring himself to*, I realized. *Someone else threw Snowpaw out of that den.*

Shaking my head quickly, getting out of my nervous thoughts, I nodded to Mousewhisker. "Yes, I'll take care of it," I answered. "I'll call you if I need your help."

Mousewhisker still looked reluctant, but after a few heartbeats he finally dipped his head. "Fine," he murmured. "But you had better keep your word, Goldenpaw."

I nodded to the young warrior. "I will," I reassured him before turning away to run over to Snowpaw, who had been standing right outside of the medicine den, trembling. When she saw me approaching her, she padded up to me to meet me in the middle of ThunderClan camp.

I pressed my flank up against hers, almost out of the hope that she would stop shaking. "Snowpaw, what happened?" I asked her shakily. I realized then that I suddenly felt as nervous as she looked.

My sister took a few heartbeats to answer, as she kept glancing back at the medicine den, her blue eyes big, wide moons. "W-when I was still sorting herbs... Hollyleaf came in."

I narrowed my eyes and flicked my ears. "Hollyleaf?" I questioned. "Didn't she go to the Gathering? Why is she back before the rest of ThunderClan is?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Snowpaw nearly whispered, her head now looking straight at the ground below. "I-I asked her what she was doing in there, and..."

I twitched my tail eagerly, waiting for Snowpaw to go on after she paused. "And?" I encouraged. "And *what?*"

I pressed closer to Snowpaw as she released a small shiver. "She... she growled at me, and said that if I didn't leave right at that moment, she would try and kill me too." she meowed quietly, her voice faltering at the last few words.

My mouth instantly dropped. *Did Hollyleaf just* threaten *my sister? Why?*

"*Too?*" I repeated out loud, after having fully processed Snowpaw's words. What had Hollyleaf meant by "too"?

Had she *killed* someone?

Snowpaw shook out her fur, and it looked like she was beginning to calm down. "Anyway," she mewed a bit more loudly, "before I could tell her that I was just sorting herbs, she picked me up by the scruff and *threw* me out!" It seemed she was trying to keep in a wail of

despair as she recalled that moment.

I shook my head, Snowpaw's latest words almost going in one of my ears and out the other. I still wondered what Hollyleaf was up to, and why in the name of StarClan she had threatened Snowpaw by saying that she would *kill* her. *Of course, there's always jokes,* I told myself. *But throwing a cat out of a den isn't very funny...*

I slowly tried to pad closer to the medicine den, my eyes narrowed. "Did you get any glimpse of what she was doing in there?" I lowered my voice down to a very low whisper, suddenly realizing that Hollyleaf might be able to hear us from where she was.

Snowpaw quietly tip-toed up to stand beside me. "No," she answered. "I didn't even get the chance!"

I nodded slowly, taking one more step closer to the medicine den. Before I could take another, I blinked quickly as a fluffy white tail suddenly overtook my vision.

"Goldenpaw!" I heard Snowpaw hiss from beside me. "What do you think you're doing? Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," I murmured, suddenly feeling a large bout of determination. I then began to lower down into a crouch, moving as stealthily as I could towards the den. "Whatever, I'm going to take a look!" I announced confidently. Whatever was happening with Hollyleaf was clearly not good, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it.

After all, once I was I warrior I was going to be facing situations like this all of the time - dealing with other Clans trespassing, border skirmishes, and countless other hinders. *And just as Thornclaw told me moons ago,* I recalled, *part of being a warrior is dealing with all of the changes and difficulties that come your way! Well, I'm going to deal with this one!*

"Oh, Goldenpaw, be careful," Snowpaw hissed quietly. "She could throw you out too!"

I shot her a glare as my concentration was broken by her words.

"Keep your fur on! I'm just taking a peek."

I then watched as Snowpaw nodded, slowly backing away from me as I turned my head back around to look at the den swarming with herb scents. I twitched my tail slightly as I arrived just by the entrance, right out of view to anyone inside.

I pricked my ears trying to catch any noises, and I let out a quiet gasp as I heard Hollyleaf, I assumed, digging through all of the herb stores. The sounds of the rustling of the herbs were unmistakeable. *Hm, maybe I should have Snowpaw come over and confirm it for me,* I joked before bringing myself back into focus.

I took a deep breath, deciding that I needed to shift over a little more so that I could see what was going on inside of the den. Slowly but surely, I peered my head inside.

Sure enough, the black pelt of Hollyleaf was standing near the back of the den where the herb stores were. Her head was down, and her paws were moving extremely quickly, as if she was looking for something.

I watched for several heartbeats as Hollyleaf dug through the leafs and berries. I then lashed my tail with intrigue as Hollyleaf shook her head quickly, as if she had recalled something. She turned her head to look over to a more secluded spot in the den before padding over to the area and picking something up from the ground.

I nearly screwed my eyes shut, trying to make out what Hollyleaf was holding in her paws. *What does Hollyleaf even need with any herbs, anyway?* I wondered, my stomach twisting as I awaited to find out the answer.

Fortunately, but also unfortunately, my question was instantly answered. When the black she-cat spread out the herbs on some leaves, I instantly knew what they were, thanks to Snowpaw.

*Deathberries!*

# Chapter 20

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

I couldn't stop myself from shaking as I watched Hollyleaf stare down at the glistening red berries, her green eyes glowing with malice.

*What does Hollyleaf want to do with deathberries?* I wondered fearfully. *Just by knowing the name of the herb, I can predict that it isn't something good.*

I quickly took a step away from the medicine den as Hollyleaf began to pace, making sure that she wouldn't turn towards the entrance to see me watching her. Almost at the same moment, another cat appeared into my view as they approached the medicine den.

It was Leafpool. I flicked my ears with curiosity as I watched her pause at the front of the den, hesitating, before finally crawling through the bramble screen and inside. She hadn't noticed me at all, and if she did, she didn't acknowledge it.

Once Leafpool was out of my sight, I returned to my original spot right outside of the medicine den so that I could hear what was being said.

"Hollyleaf," I heard Leafpool meow calmly, as if she wasn't surprised at all that Hollyleaf was in there. "It's all right. I forgive you."

I narrowed my eyes at these words. *Forgive her for what?*

Hollyleaf sounded as shocked and confused as I was. "What?!" She yowled. "You forgive me? You're the one who needs forgiveness!"

I pressed my ear even closer to the den entrance, becoming more and more captivated by this conversation. *What could Leafpool have*

*possibly done?*

I then wondered if Snowpaw was able to hear all of this too, so I turned my head around slightly to see her sitting down just a couple of tail-lengths from me. Her gaze gave absolutely nothing away.

Before I could ask my sister any questions, I heard Hollyleaf speak again. "You abandoned your kits!" She hissed. "You let us grow up in a web of lies, and now the warrior code might be broken forever because of your stupid, selfish actions."

My eyes widened like they never had before as I put all of the pieces of Hollyleaf's words together. *Is... is Leafpool, Hollyleaf's mother, and she lied to her about it? But I thought that Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw were Jayfeather's, Lionblaze's and Hollyleaf's parents. I'm so confused!*

"Do you think you need to tell me that?" Leafpool then asked. "I can only tell you how much I love you. I'm so sorry for what I did."

"And you expect me to forgive you?" Hollyleaf snarled in response. "Well, I don't. I never will."

I then found myself having to jump out of sight again as I heard some shuffling come inside, and I could just barely see Hollyleaf's long, black fur sticking out of the den entrance.

"See those deathberries?" Hollyleaf demanded, her growl ringing in my ear. "You're going to eat them, or I'll make you!"

My mouth felt as if it had dropped to the ground. *So that's why Hollyleaf got the deathberries out!* I realized, still in complete shock. *But... she wants to use them to* kill *Leafpool? Her own mother?*

I then was overwhelmed with a very ominous kind of certainty. *That's what Hollyleaf meant when she said to Snowpaw that she would try and kill her "too". It all makes sense now, in the worst kind of way.*

It was then that I came to terms with the fact that the ThunderClan medicine cat's life was possibly at stake. I was about to shove past Hollyleaf to protect Leafpool, but I stopped myself as I realized that more words were being exchanged.

"What?" Leafpool exclaimed, sounding like she was in utter shock.

"Eat them!" Hollyleaf hissed. I could now clearly see the she-cat's bristling fur from the outside of the den. "You deserve to die."

*Oh my StarClan!* I stood up, ready to leap in at any moment.

But I continued to hold myself back as I listened to Leafpool's response. "Hollyleaf," the she-cat meowed. "I have lost my kits, the one cat I loved, and my calling as a medicine cat."

I blinked my eyes open and closed a few times, I guess to make sure that what I was hearing and seeing was real.

"Which do you think would be easier for me," Leafpool continued, "to die or to go on living?"

I shook my head slowly, continuing to be in sheer confusion. So, when I suddenly saw Leafpool crawl back out of the den, it completely scared me, causing me to let out a small yelp.

Leafpool whipped her head to the side to look at me, and my heart felt as if it had skipped a beat as I met her amber gaze.

"Goldenpaw," Leafpool meowed in an unusually angry tone. "What are you doing? Have you been listening?"

I stared back at Leafpool, hoping that I was appearing way more calm on the outside than I was on the inside. "No," I lied, shaking my head quickly. "I was just passing by."

Leafpool sighed, clearly too exhausted to press anymore, but her eyes were narrowed with suspicion. "Okay, Goldenpaw," she meowed, her voice full of skepticism. "If you say so..." I then watched as the tabby-and-white she-cat lowered her head and began to pad into the clearing towards where Honeyfern was.

Beside me, I then saw a flash of black, and I practically thrusted myself in the direction of the flash to see Hollyleaf charging out of camp. I almost wanted to follow her, to see what further plans she maybe had, but then I thought better of it. *When Snowpaw and I were kits was the first time and* only *time that I will ever leave the camp*

*without permission!*

As I watched Hollyleaf's fluffy tail disappear through the gorse tunnel, I then realized something.

*Leafpool is no longer a medicine cat?* I recalled, my mouth dropping once again. Then, I snorted. *Snowpaw will be excited, won't she?*

Snowpaw seemed to be thinking the same thing that I was, for I glanced back and saw that Snowpaw was still sitting in the same place, looking incredibly joyed.

"I'm guessing you heard everything?" I asked as I padded back over to her.

She nodded quickly, her eyes sparkling. "I heard enough!" She purred. "Now I can become a medicine cat! Jayfeather will *surely* need an extra pair of paws!" As Snowpaw began to raise her voice, I think without her realizing it out of her excitement, I almost wanted to cover her mouth so that Leafpool wouldn't hear.

But luckily, Snowpaw didn't get to say any more as the both of our heads flew to the camp entrance once again. My eyes widened to see Jayfeather burst through the gorse tunnel, as quickly and swiftly as he could if he was able to see. He immediately bounded up to Snowpaw and I, who were closer to him than any other cat.

"Snowpaw? Goldenpaw?" Jayfeather called our names frantically. "Have you seen Hollyleaf?"

Snowpaw and I exchanged a nervous glance. "You just missed her!" I exclaimed to the gray tabby tom.

"She was here in the medicine den," Snowpaw explained, padding up to the medicine cat. "But she just left the camp. We don't know where she went."

Jayfeather stared at us, his eyes wide before letting his blind eyes fall to the ground. "What in the name of StarClan was she..." Jayfeather muttered, half to himself, before shaking his head quickly and turning around, running out of camp just as quickly as he had entered it. "I have to go!"

"Well, no kidding," I muttered to Snowpaw as Jayfeather's gray tail disappeared from sight. *Jayfeather is dealing with the same thing as Hollyleaf is, and Lionblaze too,* I realized.

Almost as soon as Jayfeather had left, more pelts appeared at the gorse tunnel, and I let out a half-relieved, half-exhausted sigh as I saw Lilypetal pad into camp, and the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight following right behind her.

"Leafpool!" My mother exclaimed, scanning her head around the camp and Squirrelflight doing the same. "Where are you?"

"I'm over here," Leafpool meowed, her voice revealing her extreme exhaustion. I turned my head towards her meow to see that she was sitting just underneath the Highledge.

Squirrelflight let out a huff of contentment. "*There* you are!" She meowed as she ran up to her sister.

"We've been looking all over for you!" Lilypetal explained, padding up to stand next to Squirrelflight.

"Where is everyone else?" Leafpool asked, her voice shaking with apparent nerves.

I narrowed my eyes. *Something seriously crazy happened this full-moon,* I thought. *And something I know for sure is that it definitely didn't go in Leafpool's favor, or Hollyleaf's, or Jayfeather's or Lionblaze's.*

"They're coming," Squirrelflight answered her sister. "They're right behind us."

I then watched as the three she-cats padded closer to each other, beginning to whisper. Desperate to hear what was going on, I began to walk slowly over towards the Highledge. I rolled my eyes and groaned as I felt a tail wrap itself around mine to stop me.

"Goldenpaw, haven't you already poked into other cat's business enough?" I heard Snowpaw hiss from behind me.

I whipped my head around to look at her. "What do you mean?" I

hissed back. "Come with me! Just *maybe* you'll get to hear all of the details as to why you are able to be the medicine cat now!"

Snowpaw rolled her eyes, clearly being able to detect the sarcasm in my voice.

Her tail finally let go of mine. "I've already heard all that I need to hear," she muttered before turning to pad over to the medicine den. "Fine. Do whatever you want, but I'm going to watch the medicine den while Jayfeather is still gone."

I watched my sister disappear into the medicine den before turning back around and deciding to pad over to the fresh-kill pile, where I knew I would clearly be able to hear what Lilypetal, Leafpool, and Squirrelflight were saying. After all, I *needed* to know what had gone on at this Gathering!

# Chapter 21

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

I took a glance around the ThunderClan camp before following Squirrelflight and Leafpool behind some bushes, making sure that no cat would see where we were going.

*Luckily, no cat in this camp so far knows what has happened,* I realized. *They wouldn't be suspicious of the three of us slinking away to talk... yet.*

As I settled down next to Leafpool and Squirrelflight, I couldn't help but let out a relieved huff. Squirrelflight and I had luckily been able to hunt down Leafpool almost *immediately*, finding her in the ThunderClan camp by herself, and in one piece. I had to admit, even though I had never seen Hollyleaf even hurt a fly, hunting prey aside, I was nervous of what she would do with her feelings of hurt and betrayal when it came to Leafpool.

"Leafpool, I am so sorry," I meowed softly, this being the first time I had been able to talk to the former medicine cat since the Gathering. "This is awful. I can't even imagine-" I then shook my head quickly, cutting off my own words. *As much as Leafpool has been through tonight, I don't think even sympathy will help her.*

I backtracked on my words, meowing, "I-I wish there was something I could've done this time. You didn't deserve to be exposed like that."

"This time?" Leafpool repeated. I then watched as Leafpool moved her gaze over to her sister, her eyes narrowed. "Why do I have a feeling that Lilypetal knew what was going on before this Gathering?"

Squirrelflight met Leafpool's gaze and kept it. "Because she did," Squirrelflight explained, quickly exchanging a nervous glance with

me.

"You *told* her?" The former medicine cat meowed sharply, her voice a mix of anger and shock. "But... how-"

"The only thing that *I* told Lilypetal was who Hollyleaf's, Jayfeather's and Lionblaze's real parents were," Squirrelflight insisted. "She knew everything else long before that."

I knew that Leafpool was about to question us again, so I immediately cut in. "I..." I then hesitated, being brought back to the night that had changed not only mine, but so many cats' lives. "I was there when Ashfur trapped your kits in the fire, and Squirrelflight told him that Lionblaze, Jayfeather and Hollyleaf weren't her kits." I then nodded to Squirrelflight. "Squirrelflight is right, she just gave me some more information after she found out that I knew, but otherwise, it was all on my own."

I then watched as Leafpool's amber eyes slowly widened. "Wait a moment..." she murmured. "So that's why you attacked Ashfur at that Gathering with Squirrelflight! You knew everything all along, and knew that Ashfur did as well."

"So I had to stop him," I finished for Leafpool before settling down next to her. "But that's not what matters right now. I am so sorry that that secret had to be revealed in the way that it was..." I then alternated my glance from Squirrelflight to Leafpool a few times. "And I will help you two to my last breath."

"So... what do we do?" Squirrelflight asked helplessly, settling down on Leafpool's other side.

I briefly touched my nose to Leafpool's ear as she let out a whimper. "What *can* we do?" She meowed. "The secret is out. The deed is done."

I sighed at Leafpool's words as I realized that she was right. Because of Hollyleaf's actions, Squirrelflight and Leafpool had lost the trust of many cats, and Leafpool had lost her medicine cat position. *Unless we were to tell the Clans that everything that was said was a lie,* I thought, *which would be a terrible thing to do, then Leafpool and*

*Squirrelflight are stuck like this, aren't they?*

I shook my head as I looked to the ground, showing my own defeat. "I am so, so sorry," I repeated before taking a deep breath, trying to be more optimistic. I looked over at Squirrelflight and Leafpool and nodded to them, trying to force a happier look. "Just know that I am sure that this will all blow over soon, and I hope that you both know that you two always have a friend in this Clan." *Unfortunately, at this point, that is all I can say to them.*

My heart warmed a little as I noticed Leafpool's eyes glowing with gratitude. "Thank you, Lilypetal," she meowed softly. "You've always been-"

Leafpool's words were then cut off when suddenly a sneeze carried its way to where the three of us were sitting. I whipped my head around as I then heard the bushes nearby rustle, followed by the sounds of light pawsteps getting quieter and quieter as a cat began to run away.

I snorted and rolled my eyes as I padded up to the bushes to catch a scent that I would know more than any other cat. I then turned away from the bushes, giving Squirrelflight and Leafpool a half-annoyed, half-amused look as I shook my head.

"Goldenpaw, get your tail back here, right now!" I called out. "I know you were there!"

I then sat down, waiting as I heard the same light pawsteps suddenly get louder again. And after a few heartbeats, Goldenpaw's ginger head popped out of the bushes. Her eyes were wide with fear and apprehension.

I narrowed my eyes at my daughter, my tail twitching irritably. "Were you eavesdropping?" I demanded, even though I was almost sure that I already knew the answer.

Now, Goldenpaw was a wonderful she-cat with several likeable qualities, and I thought that she took after both Thornclaw and me in many ways. She had the spirit and determination I had had as an apprentice, and she had Thornclaw's obstinacy and dedication.

*But... I'm sure that Thornclaw would agree that Goldenpaw carried over my curiosity, the kind of curiosity that sometimes brings her a bit too far into other cats' business.*

Sure enough, Goldenpaw then dipped her head, looking shamed. "Yes, I was," she admitted. I couldn't help but purr with amusement as she then began to pace, her eyes scanning over Leafpool, Squirrelflight and I. "But... I just *have* to know what has been going on!"

"Wait a moment..." Leafpool murmured, glancing at me and then at Goldenpaw with narrowed eyes. "Can I probably assume then that you actually did hear everything that was said in the medicine den?"

I reflected Leafpool's same gaze as I looked back at Goldenpaw. *She really does try to poke her nose into everything, doesn't she?* I thought. *Hopefully she'll grow out of it!*

"Yes, Leafpool. I did," Goldenpaw meowed hesitantly. "I'm sorry that I lied... I just... I didn't want to upset you more by telling you that I had listened and..." The golden apprentice then trailed off, probably realizing that there wasn't much she could say to justify what she had done.

"Well, then she knows just about everything already, doesn't she?" Squirrelflight murmured, gazing almost... *admirably* at Goldenpaw. "There's not much more for you to find out about, Goldenpaw!"

"But I'm still so confused!" My daughter exclaimed, shaking her head. "I mean, I wasn't *at* the Gathering. What happened?"

I then hissed at Goldenpaw, and when she met my gaze I lightly nodded to Squirrelflight and Leafpool, giving my daughter a warning look. *As much as you want to know the truth, don't make these two more uncomfortable than they already are by making them relive it out loud!* But, as much as I disagreed with Goldenpaw's nosiness in this situation, I understood how she felt. Apprentices, especially Goldenpaw, always seemed to curious about what was going on around camp, at Gatherings and the like. Goldenpaw wanted to do everything in her power to be an influence to her

fellow Clanmates, and help them when they needed it, even if she didn't always go about it in the *right* way.

Even with my warning to Goldenpaw, I was surprised to glance over and see Squirrelflight giving me a sort of... "should we tell her?" look.

I just shrugged to the dark ginger she-cat. "I shouldn't have a say," I pointed out to Squirrelflight. "It's completely up to you if you want to tell her."

"Well, it's not like it's much of a secret anymore," Leafpool commented, letting out a sigh as she nodded to Goldenpaw. "She'd find out soon enough."

Goldenpaw's eyes then flashed with excitement. "Oh my StarClan, *really*?" She questioned, practically at a squeal. She then stopped, taking a deep breath as she sat down. "I'm ready to hear it if you are ready to tell me," she meowed more calmly.

Leafpool, Squirrelflight and I exchanged an amused glance for just a heartbeat before Squirrelflight decided to speak.

"So," Squirrelflight began. "Here's the story..."

# Chapter 22

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

Goldenpaw stared absolutely wide-eyed as we, Leafpool and Squirrelflight mainly, explained everything that had happened. Not only did they summarize what had happened at the Gathering, but what had happened from the very beginning - Leafpool falling in love with Crowfeather, running away with him, finding out she was expecting his kits, escaping with Squirrelflight so that Leafpool could give birth... absolutely everything that had happened up until now.

At first, I was very surprised that Leafpool and Squirrelflight were going into so much detail, but I then realized that they had been hiding all of this from everybody. All of this had been swarming in their heads for moons now, and it probably just felt incredibly relieving to throw it all out to someone.

And luckily, Goldenpaw was a good cat to do it to, and I couldn't help but well up with pride as I watched her. Although she was known to be quite the talker, she was a phenomenal listener, only putting her word in when she had a question.

Eventually, Leafpool let out a sigh as she closed it off, having just finished telling Goldenpaw the background behind the confrontation in the medicine den. The former medicine cat then let her head hang down limply, exhausted, almost as if she had just released a lot of tension from her body.

"Wow," Goldenpaw breathed. "Wow. Thank you for telling me. I can't believe you *did* tell me!" Goldenpaw squealed, but then dipped her head, containing herself once again. "I'm am so sorry for what you went through... and that Hollyleaf revealed everything that way..."

Something that Goldenpaw said clearly had struck Leafpool, her

ears shooting up.

"Hollyleaf!" She exclaimed, whipping her head up to look at Goldenpaw. "Where's Hollyleaf? Where did she go after I left the medicine den?"

Goldenpaw's eyes widened, obviously surprised by Leafpool's sudden interrogation. "Well, she left camp," she answered, her voice shaking slightly. "I don't know why."

"Why *would* she leave?" Leafpool meowed worriedly, bursting through the bushes and into the camp clearing. By now, ThunderClan had returned, and a few cats glanced confusedly over as Leafpool appeared, me, Squirrelflight and Goldenpaw right behind her.

"Maybe she just left to take a walk?" Squirrelflight suggested, trying to calm her sister down. "She could be back at any moment."

"Hey!" A new voice meowed, and I turned my head slightly to see Snowpaw approaching us, her pale blue eyes curious as they usually were.

I padded up to touch noses with my daughter. "Have you seen Hollyleaf?" I asked Snowpaw once I pulled away. "Has she come back?"

I sighed with dismay as Snowpaw shook her head. "I haven't seen her, and she hasn't come back," she mewed apologetically.

*Foxdung!* I cursed to myself. *I have a bad feeling about this.* I then turned to look at Squirrelflight and Leafpool. "Should we go and look for her?" I asked the two sisters.

My eyes widened as Leafpool simply shrugged, lowering her head once again. "I'm not going to," she admitted solemnly. "I need to keep my distance for a while. I'm sure Hollyleaf wants nothing to do with me."

"Not with me, though!"

I gasped as suddenly a golden blur flashed past me, and before I

even knew what was happening, Goldenpaw's tail was disappearing through the camp entrance.

"No!" I yowled after her, finding that my paws were following soon enough. "Get back here, right now!"

Almost as I was speaking, I knew that my commands would be pointless. As I arrived at the camp entrance, I could just barely hear footsteps behind me. So, I skidded to a halt and turned around to see that Snowpaw was right on my tail.

I panted, shaking my head quickly at my daughter. "Snowpaw, no," I breathed to her. "I'll deal with your sister. Stay right here." *I don't want my other kit throwing herself into danger if I can help it.* So, I tried to think up something as quickly as I could to convince Snowpaw to stay behind.

Thank StarClan, I was able to take advantage of Snowpaw's fantasy of wanting to become a medicine cat. I nodded to the medicine den, keeping my gaze on Snowpaw. "Stay here and watch the medicine den, would you?" I meowed to her pleadingly. "Don't worry, we will be back soon."

Snowpaw didn't argue, in fact, her eyes just briefly glistened with excitement and determination before she gave me a nod and turned to pad to the medicine den.

Once I was sure that Snowpaw was inside, I whipped around and pelted out of camp, hoping that I could catch up to Goldenpaw before she got herself into some kind of trouble. *One thing that Goldenpaw certainly doesn't share with Thornclaw or me is her annoying amount of impulsiveness,* I realized. *I really hope that Hollyleaf doesn't hurt her...*

I felt as quick as a WindClan warrior as I leaped over bushes and dodged several trees. But I felt as if I was gasping for breath once Goldenpaw caught my sight. She almost seemed to be running as if her life depended on it, clearly knowing where she wanted to go. As I tried my hardest to catch up with her, I realized that not only was I following Goldenpaw, but the scent trails of Lionblaze, Jayfeather, and Hollyleaf.

*They've gone this way,* I thought. *I'm sure that Goldenpaw is trying to follow this trail.*

I pelted even faster with the hope that I might be able to run side by side with Goldenpaw. *I'm not going to let her face, whatever she's going to, alone.* But, unfortunately I had focused too much at looking straight ahead at Goldenpaw for the moment, and I let out a yelp as I suddenly tripped on a tree root and fell flat on my face.

"Foxdung! Foxdung!" I cursed out loud, heaving myself back up. "Great StarClan almighty."

I immediately sprang back up and let out a huff, seeing that Goldenpaw had now been able to run way ahead of me, and she was nowhere in sight.

I took a deep breath before bursting into a run once again, continuing to follow the same scent trail.

After several heartbeats, I found myself nearly falling on my face again as I suddenly had to stop faster than I had in my entire life.

I had found Goldenpaw, and she was standing next to Lionblaze and Jayfeather. They were all shouting down at something.

*Oh, no. What's going on*? I wondered fearfully. I padded up quickly to stand beside Goldenpaw to see that the three of them had been standing in front of one of the old ThunderClan tunnels.

*Where's Hollyleaf?* I thought, trying to push down my panic. *Is she down there? Oh, StarClan no...*

"Hollyleaf, no!" Jayfeather shouted into the tunnels, confirming my suspicions. "We can figure this out together-"

I gasped as Jayfeather's meow was then cut off by a deafening rumble, and I looked down to find a horrifying sight.

The tunnel below was beginning to collapse on Hollyleaf right in front of us.

# Chapter 23

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

"Oh, no, Hollyleaf!" I yowled, staring down at the old tunnel and watching the earth quickly begin to crumble down. I could just barely see Hollyleaf's black fur as the dirt and rocks pummeled over her body.

I knew that I couldn't just watch this happen, not when I could change things. *Now is my time to be a hero!* I realized, padding closer and closer to the collapsing tunnel, scoping the area and deciding the best place that I could dive in. *The worst that could happen is that I am struck by a few clods of dirt! It will be worth it if I'm saving a Clanmate. It's what a warrior would do.*

As I then began to crouch down, I felt a tail wrap itself around my own and pull me back. I yelped before turning to meet Lilypetal's blazing hazel gaze. My heart began to pound as I thought that I had never seen Lilypetal look so angry.

"*Goldenpaw*," Lilypetal growled like she never had before. "Don't even think about it."

*There's no time to argue!* I told my mother in my head. *I'm doing this.*

"I'm sorry!" I yowled to one of the dearest cats to me before whipping my head around, wrapping my teeth around my tail and then yanking it out of Lilypetal's grip.

*Here we go.*

Pushing away any fears or doubts, I backed up a few pawsteps and then leaped straight for the tunnel, trying to visualize myself flying straight through the falling earth.

"Goldenpaw! No!" I heard Lilypetal's earsplitting yowl, but there

was no turning back, now that I was in the air. I screwed my eyes shut as dirt pelted into my eyes. I outstretched my legs and paws, ready to push Hollyleaf forward once I got to her. I couldn't help but let out a screech of pain as I was nearly blinded by debris.

But thank StarClan, just a moment later, I felt my paws thump into a furry mass, and I found myself crashing into Hollyleaf, pushing her out of the way of the falling dirt and rocks.

*I did it!*

"Wha-?" I heard Hollyleaf exclaim as I slammed into her. The both of us then flopped onto the ground as we both landed, and I could just barely still hear Lilypetal calling my name, Lionblaze's and Jayfeather's yowls blending with hers.

I just lied where I was for a few heartbeats, trying to catch my breath as the last of the earth then closed in. And then, it was silent. If Lilypetal, Jayfeather or Lionblaze were still calling out, I certainly couldn't hear them.

I let out a huff as I slowly got myself to stand up, wincing slightly at some minor scratches I had gotten with the jump. I shook out my fur, almost as if to try and shake off the pain. I lifted my head, scanning my gaze around to look at my surroundings. *It's almost no use though!* I realized. *I can barely see a thing!*

My gaze then fell on the wall that had been formed, where there used to be an entrance into the cave. I gasped, now processing the fact that the way I had entered was now closed off. I quickly leaped over to the wall of dirt and rocks and tried to dig up, or dislodge *something*.

In those moments as I was so concentrated on finding a way of escape, I nearly forgot that someone else was in this tunnel with me, so I flinched and let out a startled yelp when Hollyleaf suddenly spoke from behind me.

"It's no use, Goldenpaw! Don't even try," the black she-cat growled, her pawsteps echoing through the tunnel. "We're *stuck*."

*Oh, no!*

I turned to face Hollyleaf, who in the darkness just looked like a pair of green eyes. "There has to be *some way* out!" I wailed, whipping myself around again to play with the rocks. I suddenly felt myself welling up with panic, for one of the first times ever. *I don't regret saving Hollyleaf, not even a little bit,* I thought. *But... It's unfortunate that it had to happen at the cost of being trapped away from my family, Clanmates, and apprentice duties...*

I then shook my head quickly. *Don't think like that,* I told myself. *You saved Hollyleaf, and you are going to find a way out of here soon.*

Feeling a sudden surge of determination, I began to dig with all of my might at the wall of dirt. *I can do this. I can do this!* I kept repeating into my head. I even felt a little more encouraged as I watched some dirt clods thump onto the cold ground.

"Hey, Goldenpaw!" I heard Hollyleaf meow from further away than she had been before. "Forget about that for now. Come here and look at this!"

"Hold on!" I called back, letting my forepaws land back onto the ground from where they had been digging. As excited as Hollyleaf had sounded, I was very reluctant to leave my work. Lilypetal was no more than a few tail-lengths above me, I *knew* that I could dig up to her if I really tried.

*But... maybe if I take some time, the dirt will maybe loosen?* I tried to tell myself before shrugging. *I'll just try again after I go and see what Hollyleaf wants.*

Taking one more glance at the dirt wall, I then turned around and padded carefully through the tunnel, trying to focus on following Hollyleaf's scent, and not the darkness seeming to enfold me. After a few more steps, I was then surprised to see that there was light up ahead, and I could make out the outline of Hollyleaf's thick fur.

The black she-cat glanced back at me as she heard me approach her. "There you are. Finally!" Hollyleaf meowed, beckoning me to her with her tail. "Why try and find your way out when you could

look at this every day?"

I finally padded up to stand next to Hollyleaf, and immediately gasped as I processed all of the surroundings. We were standing before quite a large area, a cave, the walls rising a couple of fox-lengths high. A small stream ran across the center of the cave floor. Moss was growing all over the walls, and the area was somewhat lit by a small hole in the top, where moonlight was able to shine through.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, trying to take in every piece of the area in front of me. *This is absolutely beautiful! I could stay here forever!*

# Chapter 24

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Goldenpaw!" I yowled, my voice practically straining with how loudly I had spoken. I could barely contain the grief and pain that I felt as I watched the last of my daughter's golden fur disappear among the falling dirt.

Immediately, I leaped at the pile of earth and began to dig, trying to hold back whimpers of complete distress. *Just a few heartbeats ago, Goldenpaw was right here beside me, safe, and now she could be buried alive.* I then threw my head up in the air, letting out a distressed yowl. *She can't be dead! She can't!* I though miserably. *I refuse to believe it.*

"It's no use, Lilypetal," I heard Lionblaze meow behind me. "Goldenpaw is gone. Hollyleaf too."

I whipped my head to the side to see the tabby tom holding Jayfeather back, whose blind eyes were filled with misery as he clawed at the ground desperately. I shook my head quickly, realizing that in my blind panic, Jayfeather had also been trying to dig at the earth in order to retrieve his sister.

"You... you're joking right?" I growled to Lionblaze, trying to keep my voice level but not succeeding as I responded to his words. "You think that you can say that to a mother? No!" I then whipped my head back around to attempt to dig some more. "There is no way in the name of StarClan that I will believe that Goldenpaw is dead unless you *heave* her dead body out of this ground and *show* me her corpse!"

I heard Lionblaze simply sigh at my words as I continued to throw clods of grass and dirt behind me. *Oh, StarClan, what will Thornclaw say? I will barely be able to handle seeing the look on his face. And Snowpaw! How will I tell her that her sister may be dead?*

I tried my hardest to push those thoughts away, inhaling and exhaling the deepest I ever had. *None of that will happen, because I won't have to tell them that Goldenpaw is dead, because she's not. She's* not!

I stood up completely, trying to replace all of my worry and grief with determination and optimism. I knew that if I didn't do that, I would just crumble down as the earth had into the tunnels. I turned back to Lionblaze and Jayfeather, who were exchanging some fairly quiet words.

"Let's say that she chased a squirrel into the tunnel, and it collapsed on her," Jayfeather was meowing once I was back in earshot. "They can remember her for being a brave hunter, feeding her Clan. They don't need to know the truth - that she was trying to escape from them."

I realized that the two brothers were trying to find a way to make Hollyleaf's legacy sound a bit lighter to ThunderClan, despite all that she had done tonight. I nodded, not even sure if Jayfeather or Lionblaze noticed the approval. *I do agree with that,* I thought. *But Hollyleaf won't need a legacy yet, because she and Goldenpaw must be down there, alive!*

I then watched as Jayfeather and Lionblaze took one last glance at where the tunnel had been before beginning to travel in the direction of camp.

I immediately trotted up to meet them. I nodded to Lionblaze before meowing, "I'll run ahead and tell Firestar what is going on." Without waiting for Lionblaze's or Jayfeather's response, I gave them a curt nod and then began to pelt through the forest, not looking back.

*There's no way that I'm going to let Jayfeather and Lionblaze arrive first, and make the Clan believe that Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf are dead!* I thought to myself. *I'm going to find Firestar first thing, tell him what's going on, and then get a patrol together to save Hollyleaf and my daughter!*

# Chapter 25

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

It felt like seasons that Hollyleaf and I just sat there, staring into the small cave in awe, the only sounds I could hear being the quiet rippling of the stream and the distant chirping of crickets. I mean, it was so pretty that I almost forgot that there was no way out, and that we were stuck in there.

I then flicked my ears as I came to a realization. *Well... at least as far as we know!* I thought. I had come to terms with the fact that trying to dislodge the dirt wall that had originally collapsed would be no use. *My claws would all fall off before I got anything accomplished!*

But, I still refused to believe that Hollyleaf and I were completely trapped, there was no way. With this in mind, I finally averted my gaze away from the beautiful sight in front of me and trying to find any possible means of escape.

"What are you doing?" Hollyleaf asked, narrowing her eyes as she watched me.

I paused from where I had begun to pace around. "What do you mean?" I asked the warrior, tilting my head to the side. "Are we ever going to find a way out of here?"

I nearly flinched as Hollyleaf hissed, then whipping her head down to break her gaze from mine. "What's the point?" She muttered through gritted teeth. "You'd just be wasting your time, at least I know that *I* would."

I continued to just listen as Hollyleaf then stood up, her eyes glowing with fascination as she began to look around the cave. "And anyway, why would we *want* to leave?" She asked, actually sounding bewildered at the fact that I wanted to escape. "This place is great!"

I was shocked at *her* words. Had tonight really messed with her so much that she never wanted to see ThunderClan again? Her Clanmates? Her brothers? "But we have a Clan that we need to stay loyal to and protect with our lives!" I insisted to the black she-cat. "What about your friends and Clanmates? Hunting out in the forest? Fighting for your Clan in battle?"

When Hollyleaf stayed silent, I found myself suddenly overcome with sympathy as I almost felt her sadness and sense of loss. I sighed, padding up to the she-cat and putting the tip of tail on her shoulder. "You *really* want to stay here?" I asked her more softly. I hoped that Hollyleaf wouldn't pull away from my touch, and luckily, she just sighed and lashed her tail.

She then managed to meet my gaze as she finally spoke. "Again, what's the point?" She rasped. "ThunderClan, no - *all* of the Clans probably think that I was out of my mind for revealing that secret. They, let alone ThunderClan, will want *nothing* to do with me."

She then sighed again, shaking her head slowly. "I thought it was the right thing to do... but I guess I was wrong. Staying right here is probably best for me."

"That is *not* true, Hollyleaf!" I exclaimed, standing up. "Every cat makes mistakes."

Hollyleaf snorted before I could go on. "Mistake, huh?" She murmured. "What I did was not a *mistake*. A mistake is missing a piece of prey on a hunting trip. What I did, Goldenpaw, was far worse than that."

I sighed, realizing that Hollyleaf's words were not completely outrageous. *I mean... a secret like that couldn't be kept all of their lives,* I thought, *but I do agree that it wasn't the best idea to reveal it that way.* Even though that was how I felt, I knew that I wasn't going to share that with Hollyleaf, for it wouldn't help her at all.

I hesitated, trying to find the right words to say. I pricked my ears as I finally came up with something. "Listen," I began, "Facing ThunderClan will be difficult, I know, but won't lingering around down here with your thoughts be even worse?"

I watched as Hollyleaf pricked her ears, then looking back up to meet my gaze.

"I know that either way it will be hard to live with what you've done," I continued. "But I can see it now, you will be watching cats grant you their forgiveness before you know it!"

Hollyleaf sniffed, and I couldn't tell if she truly believed my words or not. "You think so?" She muttered.

"I do," I responded, touching my nose to Hollyleaf's ear. I then pulled back and simply watched as Hollyleaf seemingly tried to gather her thoughts.

Hollyleaf looked back at me with admiration and gratitude glowing in her green eyes. "You've grown to be quite wise, haven't you?" Hollyleaf managed to purr. "You know, Goldenpaw, I'm actually glad to have you here with me."

I gasped, surprised at the she-cat's praise. "You are?" I questioned. "Really?"

"Yeah, I am," Hollyleaf responded. "And... it was brave... *very* brave for you to save me and push me out of the way like that. Who knows what could've happened if you weren't there?"

Before I could respond to Hollyleaf's words, she let out a snort and then meowed, "It at least shows that *one* cat in my Clan isn't infuriated with me."

"Of course I'm not infuriated with you. I'm glad to keep you company, *and* I was glad to save you," I told the warrior before beginning to hesitate on my next words. "But... as much as I want to stand by your side, I... I can't. If you really want to stay, I won't make you do something that you don't want to, but I have to get back! I have my family, my apprentice duties..." I trailed off as I heard Hollyleaf snort again.

"You're definitely not going to be an apprentice for long!" Hollyleaf meowed more brightly, to my surprise. "You can fight well, you're almost *too* loyal of a Clan cat, and you're a great hunter!"

I looked away from the black she-cat, barely being able to take it as she threw even more praise at me. I realized then that my ears were growing hot with embarrassment. There would have been a time, moons ago, where praise like this would send me flying up to the top of an oak tree, especially when it came from a warrior like Hollyleaf. But now, as I had grown, the attention did nothing but humble me.

"The Clan respects *you,*" Hollyleaf then went on. "I agree, you *do* need to go back."

I shrugged. "I just want to be the best warrior I can be!" I told Hollyleaf before giving her a nudge on the shoulder. "But you're a *fantastic* warrior! You are so brave, you honor the warrior code like no other cat does. I look up to you *so* much!"

Hollyleaf didn't say anything to my affirmations, but she looked at me with gratitude glowing in her eyes.

Realizing that I may have finally been able to pull her in, I put my tail tip back on the she-cat's shoulder, insisting, "The Clan *needs* you, Hollyleaf!"

Without waiting for Hollyleaf's response, I whipped myself around and began to trot around the cave, looking for a possible escape route once again.

"Let's find a way out here!" I shouted.

# Chapter 26

[image]

***Lilypetal's POV***

"Thornclaw, great StarClan, for the last time," I insisted to my mate as we padded side by side through the forest, Snowpaw on my other side while Firestar, Brightheart, Cloudtail, Lionblaze, Jayfeather and Spiderleg followed. "Take a breath, please. Trust me, I have almost died of suffocation on more than one occasion tonight, but I've managed to get myself to inhale and exhale."

I then watched as Thornclaw lashed his golden tabby tail, finally managing to close his eyes and take a deep breath. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry," Thornclaw meowed softly, touching his nose to my cheek. But just heartbeats later I groaned as Thornclaw let out another growl and began to pace back and forth as we traveled. "You know what? No! I'm not sorry, I'm *furious!*"

"We all are!" Spiderleg hissed from behind, followed by a warning glance from Firestar.

"How could Goldenpaw have been so mouse-brained?" Thornclaw went on, ripping at a patch of grass on the ground. "Our daughter could be *dead* right now, all because she decided that leaping into a tunnel was *heroic!*"

"It's awful. I'm furious too!" Snowpaw whimpered, speaking her first words since we had left on this patrol. "What can I do? Blame Goldenpaw herself for causing me to never be able to see her again?"

I screwed my eyes shut at Thornclaw's and Snowpaw's words, trying to push down grief and worry once again. "Do *not* lose hope, both of you," I muttered to Snowpaw and Thornclaw, not meeting either of their gazes. "I'm not going to." After suppressing a whimper, I then whispered, "I'm staying strong because of that glimmer of hope, and the fact that StarClan is watching all of us, like they always do."

After a few heartbeats, I heard a sigh, and turned my head back to Thornclaw to see that he was looking back at me, his eyes calm and warm.

"You're absolutely right," he whispered back to me, touching his nose to my head.

I returned the warm gaze, letting Thornclaw's pale blue gaze and warm scent sooth me for a few heartbeats before looking ahead and wrapping my tail around Snowpaw's back, who had simply murmured agreement. *Snowpaw is much more of a thinker than she is a talker,* I thought. *But she's never been* this *quiet before. It's obvious how much this is bothering her, the poor thing.*

I then let out a small humph, narrowing my eyes. *I hope the words that I just told Thornclaw and Snowpaw were sincere*, I realized as we walked without any more words. *As strong as my faith in StarClan is, I am still very, very scared...* I briefly glanced at Thornclaw to see that he didn't look completely comforted either.

Letting out an exasperated huff, I dug my head into Thornclaw's neck fur as we let Firestar take the lead, walking deeper into the forest.

After several moments of silence, I then heard Spiderleg mutter to someone, "If Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf are dead, this is a *big* waste of my time." I let out a quiet hiss as I realized that it almost seemed like the black tom had *wanted* me to hear, but I tried my best to ignore him and his horrible words.

Luckily, it wasn't too long after that that our patrol finally arrived at the area where the earth had caved into the tunnel. The space was just as Jayfeather, Lionblaze and I had left it, which for some reason sent a chill down my spine.

I heard pawsteps approaching me once we had paused, and I turned to see that Firestar was approaching.

"So, Hollyleaf and Goldenpaw are trapped down there?" he asked, his gaze not leaving the pile of dirt.

I lashed my tail and nodded, pleased that Firestar had referred to Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf being *trapped*, and not, you know, *killed*.

"Yes," I answered to the ThunderClan leader, finding that my voice cracked with sudden fear. "They... they're down there, somewhere."

Firestar nodded, putting the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "We *will* find Goldenpaw," he meowed gently, then turning to look at where Jayfeather and Lionblaze were standing nearby. "And we will find Hollyleaf." He gave his kin a reassuring nod before turning around to face our patrol. "Does anyone have any idea as to how we can find our way into the tunnels?"

It was several heartbeats before anyone spoke, not because they were afraid to, but I think they were truly at a loss for words when it came to coming up with a solution.

"Well, I might have a suggestion..."

I raised my eyebrows as I whipped my head around to look at Snowpaw, who had spoken from right beside me. She looked back at me just briefly, her eyes glowing with a mix of determination and uncertainty, before padding up to Firestar.

"Tell us your plan, Snowpaw," Firestar meowed, nodding to signal that the apprentice could speak.

My daughter hesitated at first, shyly shifting her paws from side to side. Thornclaw and I exchanged a half-amused, half-anxious glance.

"Well...I was thinking..." she began, for some reason scanning her gaze around the area as she spoke. "There was one time, about a moon ago, when I wandered around this area. I think Brackenfur and Sorreltail were trying to explain a battle move to Goldenpaw that I already understood..."

The cats on patrol purred with amusement, growing quickly silent as they waited for Snowpaw to go on. Snowpaw purred briefly. "Anyway," she continued, "When I was looking around, I found this... *hole* in the ground. Unfortunately I can't remember exactly

where it was, but anyway... I bent down and took a peek inside to see that a *cave* was down there! This was a hole at the top of it, where sunlight shone into the inside."

"What about it?" Firestar asked, tilting his bright ginger head, clearly intrigued by Snowpaw's words.

Snowpaw seemed to realize this too, looking down to the ground as she spoke her next words. "I was thinking... maybe if we could *find* this hole," she meowed, "We could, *all* of us, somehow dislodge the earth around the hole, to where Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf could fit through it and use the debris as a boost to jump out!" Snowpaw gave a sharp nod as she finished.

I couldn't help but purr as I heard murmurs and grunts of approval come from the patrol behind me. An indescribable amount of pride for Snowpaw welled up inside of me. *She's so intelligent, and at the same time, so humble about it,* I thought fondly. *She will be honored for her wisdom for moons to come.*

"Snowpaw." Firestar addressed the white apprentice, his gaze reflecting the same pride that I felt. "That idea just might work."

My gaze followed Firestar as he then briefly touched his nose to Snowpaw's ear. "You are going to be quite the clever medicine cat! ThunderClan is lucky to have you."

Snowpaw simply murmured gratitude and looked down at her paws as I stared at her in shock. *Since when is Snowpaw an apprentice medicine cat?* I wondered. Moons ago, Thornclaw had told me all about the little quarrel that had occurred between Goldenpaw and Snowpaw, when Goldenpaw had found out that Snowpaw was taking an interest in medicine cat duties. Nevertheless, I was still surprised.

I pressed my muzzle up to Thornclaw's ear. "Did I miss some sort of transaction earlier?" I hissed only loudly enough for Thornclaw to hear.

Thornclaw glanced back at Snowpaw before whispering back to me, "If you missed it, then so did I!"

I shrugged at my mate, still completely baffled before looking over to where Jayfeather was standing. He didn't look shocked or confused by Firestar's comment at all. *So it must be true,* I realized, my eyes widening as I was filled with pride once again. *My daughter is the apprentice medicine cat of ThunderClan!*

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted. "How could we make the hole... *bigger*?" I heard someone in the crowd shout. It sounded like Cloudtail.

Snowpaw seemed to be growing excited at the fact that the patrol was wanting to go with her idea. "We could all put our weight around it to break the edges, or maybe claw at them!" She suggested, her tail lashing back and forth quickly.

I began to knead my paws anxiously, ready to get on with this plan that definitely sounded like could work. "We could try!" I prompted, nodding with acquiescence to my daughter. *Firestar is right,* I thought. *Snowpaw is incredibly clever.*

"Let's do it, then!" Firestar yowled, nodding to the patrol to signal that they could start looking for this supposed hole that Snowpaw had mentioned.

Luckily, it didn't take long at all. I nearly let out a thrilled yelp when I heard Brightheart's voice come from a clearing just a little ways ahead. "I think this is it!" The she-cat's voice echoed through the nearly-silent forest.

Everyone's heads whipped around to where they had heard Brightheart's yowl, and then quickly padded over to her voice. I followed, praying to StarClan that Brightheart had found the right thing.

I watched as Snowpaw approached the ginger and white she-cat. She observed Brightheart's find for just a heartbeat before nodding.

"That's it!" Snowpaw meowed, nodding. "I have no doubt."

I stepped aside as Cloudtail then padded past me to go and stand beside his mate. He bend his head down to look inside the hole.

"Oh, I can see what's inside!" The white warrior exclaimed before lifting his head and just barely lowering his muzzle down the hole. "Hello? Anyone down there?"

I flicked my ears as I realized that I could just barely hear a gasp come from inside, followed by some very quick pawsteps.

"Cloudtail! Is that you?"

I let out a yowl of happiness and triumph as I recognized Goldenpaw's voice. *She's alive!* I thought, feeling more relieved that I ever had in my whole life. *And she's okay! At least, she sounds okay. I hope she's okay. Whatever, she's alive!*

I practically ran up to join Snowpaw, Cloudtail and Brightheart. "Goldenpaw! It's Lilypetal!" I called down.

"And Thornclaw is here too!" I heard my mate exclaim as he leaped up to stand beside me.

"Are you okay? Is Hollyleaf there too?" I meowed desperately.

"I'm here! And we're fine!" I heard Hollyleaf shout from below.

I let out a sigh. *Thank StarClan.*

I then felt Snowpaw gently shoulder herself between Thornclaw and I. "Don't worry!" She commanded to the two trapped she-cats. "We're here to save you!"

I purred as I heard Goldenpaw squeal like a kit. "No way!" She exclaimed.

"Stay back," Snowpaw called down, nodding to the patrol to get into position. "We're going to make you an entrance to jump out of!"

Thornclaw, Snowpaw, Brightheart, Cloudtail and I stayed where we were while we waited for Firestar, Lionblaze and Spiderleg to join us. Jayfeather watched us from a few tail-lengths away.

"Well?" Spiderleg asked impatiently once we all surrounded the hole. "What do we do now?"

I looked at him, trying to think quickly. "We can jump?" I suggested. I glanced over to Firestar, seeking his approval.

The ThunderClan leader gave me a brief nod, to my relief. "That will work," Firestar agreed before bending his head to look through the hole. "If this earth does give out, and cats fall in, it shouldn't make for even any minor injuries."

I then found that every cat's gaze moved over to me. At first, I was confused, but I shook my head quickly as I realized, *well I did suggest this idea. They're waiting for* me *to give the signal.*

I took a deep breath, ready to possibly face a bit of a fall. "Ready..." I murmured, making sure to nod at every cat surrounding the hole before giving the signal. "Now!"

A wave of satisfaction rushed through me as I witnessed how perfectly the plan went right in front of my eyes. Me, Firestar, Thornclaw, Snowpaw, Cloudtail, Brightheart, Lionblaze, Spiderleg and Snowpaw had all managed to jump and land back on the ground at the same time. As soon as my paws touched earth again, I found that I wasn't landing on sturdy ground anymore. And sure enough, after a few heartbeats, there was a loud rumbling sound surrounded the clearing.

I flicked my ears and let out a yelp as the ground below us suddenly gave out, and some cats, me included, fell down into the tunnel. I landed with a bit of a rough thump, the breath being knocked out of me.

*Well, I suppose saving a couple of lives is worth losing a bit of air,* I thought jokingly as Thornclaw leaped over to me to help me up. I looked up to see that Brightheart, Snowpaw, Lionblaze and Firestar peering down at us, while Cloudtail and Spiderleg were still working their way out of the rubble. I couldn't help but purr with amusement as I watched Spiderleg spit bits of dirt from his mouth as he grunted irritably.

"Hey!" A familiar voice shouted. "You *did* it!"

I quickly turned around to see that Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf

padding up to us.

My heart warmed at the sight of my daughter, and I was suddenly so happy that I thought I could barely stand it. *She was here safe all along!* I thought, glad that I hadn't given up hope since I had watched her disappear after Hollyleaf. *Great StarClan, I don't know what I would have done if we had found the two of them, down here, dead.* I immediately shook away that thought, thankful that that wasn't even close to the case at all. Hollyleaf and Goldenpaw were alive, and they would be able to return to ThunderClan safely.

"Goldenpaw!" I yowled, running up to meet her.

Thornclaw followed right behind me. "You little tunneler, come here!"

Goldenpaw was purring loudly as she pressed her nose against mine, and then Thornclaw's. "I-I'm so sorry," she began to stammer, her gaze flicking from Thornclaw's to mine over and over. "I just wanted to-"

I prevented Goldenpaw from saying any more, raising my tail up to her muzzle to silence her. "We'll discuss all of this later," I meowed to her, turning back to look up at the now enlarged hole. "For now, let's get out of here!"

One by one, every cat who had fallen in leaped out of the tunnel. It was easy, just as Snowpaw had predicted, because the debris from the top had stacked up slightly, giving us an extra step in order to make the jump up to the ground.

I made sure that Goldenpaw, who had gone before me, make it up safely before I leaped up myself. I began to pad up to the opening, deciding to pause briefly to see if we had for some reason missed anyone. I scanned the clearing and nodded, sure that no cat was behind me.

But, I almost instantly whipped my head around again as I thought that my eyes had caught sight of something unusual. I looked back one more time, just to be sure.

This time, I thought I saw what looked like a white and ginger tail vanishing into the darkness.

I narrowed my eyes, utterly confused. *Brightheart was up on higher ground this entire time, so it wasn't her...* I thought before I just decided to blame it on my eyes playing tricks on me. *Just seeing things...*

I finally leaped out of the tunnel to see that the patrol, joined by Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf, were standing there waiting for me. Lionblaze and Jayfeather were clustered around their sister, whispering quietly to her, while Snowpaw nuzzled her head into Goldenpaw's fur.

"Goldenpaw, you stupid furball!" Snowpaw exclaimed as we began to travel back to camp. "And I thought that Lilypetal leaping after that snake was ridiculous. This is the next level!"

I gasped at Snowpaw's words as I padded beside Brightheart and Thornclaw.

I could hardly believe that the snake attack had happened not even a full day ago, just before the Gathering that led to Hollyleaf running down into these tunnels in the first place. And when our rescue patrol had left, the official vigil for Honeyfern had *just* ended. Now, moonhigh had left us, and the navy sky was fading away to be replaced with the purple dawn sky.

*So much has happened in one day...*

Thinking of this made me realize how absolutely *exhausted* from this day that I was. I let out an exasperated huff, leaning my head on Thornclaw's shoulder.

*So much has happened,* I repeated to myself*, but we made it through.*

I was pulled from my thoughts for a brief moment, purring with amusement as Thornclaw tripped on a stick. But, after I helped my mate to find his footing again, I returned to my own head.

*I made it through*, I told myself, imagining and wondering how I would have handled this whole situation when I was a kittypet, or

when I had first arrived in ThunderClan. I would have been absolutely helpless and clueless, surely. I had been passionate and curious, sure, but even that wasn't enough to handle what I had faced today. *Those times are so far behind me*, I realized.

It was because of the things I had faced in the Clan so far that had driven me to take action, to solve problems when needed. Speaking out against Ashfur, hunting Ashfur down in the forest and chasing him out, standing up for Squirrelflight and Leafpool, and even running to camp first to tell Firestar that Goldenpaw and Hollyleaf were trapped were things that I could have never imagined doing just some moons ago.

I sighed and closed my eyes, relying on Thornclaw to direct me as I continued to lean my head on his shoulder. *And now we have two daughters, with amazing futures ahead of them!* I thought fondly as I heard Snowpaw and Goldenpaw whisper to each other just in front of me. *I can't wait to see how they grow, too.*

# Chapter 27

[image]

***Goldenpaw's POV***

The travel back to camp with the rescue patrol felt like it took moons. I had had to travel somewhat slowly through the forest, my legs hurting as if I had just run around the lake several times over. But, I had walked the whole way, side by side with Snowpaw, as my heart seemed to grow and warm up with each pawstep. Yes, I was bone-tired, but in a way, I felt happier than I ever had before. It was kind of like that exhausted-tired that you feel when you fight for something you want, and after lots of strife, you *finally* get it.

My head was held high when our patrol arrived into ThunderClan camp. I was surprised to see that many cats were still awake, clearly awaiting our arrival. Once Hollyleaf and I were in sight, ripples of yowls and gasps spread throughout the clearing. *As tired as I am*, I thought, *a pleasant welcome is very nice!*

I exchanged an amused glance with Hollyleaf as all of the kits immediately burst out of the crowd to stand in front of our patrol, beginning to pester us with questions.

"Were you scared?"

"What were the tunnels like?"

"Did you almost die?"

The answers I gave were brief, firstly because I tried to answer every question that I could, and secondly because I was just *that* tired, and even *speaking* felt like work.

After the excitement of our arrival had died down, the cats of ThunderClan had begun to spread out - Brambleclaw sending out the dawn patrol, cats discussing the events of the past day, and some going to their dens to sleep - which was what I had decided to

do.

After saying goodnight, well... good *morning* rather to Lilypetal and Thornclaw, I had padded over to meet Snowpaw, who was waiting for me by the medicine den.

I had let out a huff as I walked up to meet her. "So..." I breathed, sitting down, deciding to address the situation that had gone unspoken on our way back to camp. "You're finally the medicine cat apprentice, huh?"

Snowpaw had stared back at me solemnly, her head nodding slowly. "Yes, I am," she meowed, her eyes already lighting up as she gave me her answer. She then looked wary, hesitating before saying her next words. "Listen, Goldenpaw, I'm sorry-"

I lifted my tail up, signaling for Snowpaw to stop speaking. "There's no need to be sorry," I murmured, touching my nose to my sister's. "I'll be fine. I'm happy that you're happy."

Snowpaw's ears flicked as her eyes widened. I narrowed my eyes as I saw this. *She is actually surprised that she has my approval...* I thought sadly. *I've made her feel terribly about this for moons just because I was selfish. I should have tried to integrate Thornclaw's words in more ways than just saving my Clanmates...*

"Really?" Snowpaw had questioned, interrupting my thoughts.

I gave the white she-cat a sharp nod as I looked back at her warmly. "Yes," I whispered, twinning my tail with my sister's. "But that doesn't mean I won't miss you having me at my side all of the time, and that I necessarily *like* that this is happening..."

Snowpaw nodded slowly, her pale blue eyes thoughtful. "I understand, Goldenpaw," Snowpaw purred. "Thank you."

I had then let out a sigh of relief, realizing that conflict that had been jabbing at me since Snowpaw first looked at the medicine den, had now been resolved. *We are taking two completely different paths, but that is okay,* I told myself as I finally gave Snowpaw a farewell flick of my tail and crawling into the apprentices den, the sun

already in sight as dawn began to vanish.

Now, it was the next day, and I had just woken up from the deepest sleep I had ever had.

I stood up, now mind and body feeling fully energized as I trotted out to face the sun, which was now high in the sky. I was confused to see that almost every cat in ThunderClan seemed to be gathered under the Highledge.

I tilted my head to the side, scanning the camp around me. *What's happening?* I wondered. *I didn't hear Firestar call for a Clan meeting!*

"*There* you are!" I heard a familiar voice exclaim from behind me, and I turned to see the gray and white pelt of Mousewhisker. "I was just about to go into the apprentices den and yank you out of that nest!"

I purred with amusement, but I was still confused. "But why?" I asked as Mousewhisker padded up to sit beside me.

"Well, for one, it is very late," Mousewhisker answered teasingly, nudging me on the shoulder with his as I rolled my eyes. "And also, Firestar called a Clan meeting. Didn't you hear him?"

I gasped, my mouth dropping. *So I did sleep through Firestar's yowl!* I realized, thankful that I had woken up when I did. *Great StarClan, my body was really trying to rest.* "No!" I finally answered Mousewhisker, then lowering my voice as the clearing fell silent. "I wonder what's going on?" *Well, there would certainly be a lot of things to address from yesterday...*

"I have many guesses," Mousewhisker whispered, repeating my thoughts, as he watched Firestar gaze over his Clan from the Highledge. After a few heartbeats, the ThunderClan leader finally spoke.

"Cats of ThunderClan," he began. "Last night Hollyleaf revealed secrets that shocked us all."

As Firestar spoke, I shot a sympathetic glance over at where the black she-cat was sitting next to Lionblaze and Jayfeather,

wondering what she thought of Firestar bringing up her actions from last night. But, to my surprise, her gaze remained even as she listened to the ThunderClan leader.

Firestar continued. "But that prey is eaten. There can be no going back. Instead we must find the way forward, for all of us."

"What about the other Clans?" I heard Dustpelt call out from the other side of the clearing. "Now, they all know what happened."

Firestar acknowledged the warrior's words with a quick nod before looking over at Hollyleaf, his gaze giving nothing away. "Maybe some things should not have been said," he admitted. "But the deed is done. As for the other Clans - they think we are broken."

I then watched, my tail lashing excitedly as Firestar lifted his head up in pride. "It's up to us to show them that we are not," he yowled out. "ThunderClan will survive!"

I joined in as yowls of agreement rose from around the clearing. Firestar was absolutely right. ThunderClan was strong, and we wouldn't let something like this stand in our way!

I then raised my eyebrows as Firestar continued to stand where he was on the Highledge, waiting for silence. *I wonder what more there is to say?*

Once the camp had fallen quiet, the leader spoke again, my heart nearly dropping into my stomach as his gaze fell on me. "One way that we can put this Clan back together, is by commemorating and making a new warrior."

*Wait... what?!*

I gasped, utterly surprised by Firestar's words. I then looked around shyly as cats purred with amusement, my gasp having been quite audible.

I then felt Mousewhisker lightly poke me with his tail. He bent his head down to whisper in my ear. "Well, how about that? You almost slept through your warrior ceremony!"

I gave my friend an amused look before looking back up at Firestar.

"Goldenpaw showed immense courage last night, risking her life to save Hollyleaf's," Firestar meowed clearly, his eyes glowing with gratitude and admiration as he looked down at me. "For this, I can say with complete certainty that this apprentice deserves her warrior name."

I still was having a hard time processing Firestar's words as I stared back up at him, my eyes wide. I turned my head to look at Sorreltail to see her looking back at me. She nodded her head slowly as I gave her a questioning look. *So, Sorreltail knew about this already*! I realized, beginning to knead my paws into the ground with enthusiasm. *This is really happening!*

I then looked back at Firestar to see that he was beckoning me forward with a flick of his tail. I took a deep breath and began to pad up to meet the ThunderClan leader as he leaped down from the Highledge. I glanced back for just a moment and saw Lilypetal, Thornclaw, Mistpelt, and Snowpaw and many others staring back at me, pride and happiness showing in their eyes. *I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them... they've taught me so much.*

I took a deep breath, stopping just a tail-length in front of Firestar. It was now beginning to settle in that within heartbeats, I would no longer be an apprentice. The moment that I had been anticipating since I'd first opened my eyes was here. I was *finally* going to be a warrior, at last!

I held my breath as I watched Firestar lift his head to the sky.

"I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She trained trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn."

Firestar then lowered his head to meet my gaze, his green eyes shimmering in the sunlight. "Goldenpaw," he continued. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

*There's absolutely no doubt about that.* I dipped my head to Firestar, and meowed as sharply and clearly as I could, "I do."

A chill suddenly ran down my spine as Firestar's voice then rang across the clearing. "Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Goldenpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Goldenshine. StarClan honors you for your dedication and bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

I had never felt so exhilarated as I did when I heard my Clanmates shout out my name.

"Goldenshine! Goldenshine! Goldenshine!"

A sudden rush of excitement surging through me, I let out a squeal, jumping up in the air. I then forced myself to remain calm for just a moment as Firestar touched his nose to my head. "You are going to be a warrior that this Clan will be proud of, Goldenshine," Firestar meowed to me as he pulled away.

"Thank you, Firestar," I breathed out after I had licked the leader's shoulder. *I am so glad to hear you say that*, I said to him in my head. *I am going to try with all of my might.*

I then was overwhelmed as I turned around, cats gathering around to congratulate me. Snowpaw was the first one to arrive to me.

"You're a warrior now, Goldenshine!" My sister purred, touching her nose to mine. "I am so proud of you, you have no idea!"

"Oh, I think I do!" I teased, purring with amusement at Snowpaw's enthusiasm. Snowpaw was definitely known as one of the most demure cats in ThunderClan, but if the white she-cat was excited enough, she could sometimes behave as energetically as a kit! Her eagerness made me feel all the more happy for just a moment, before I suddenly felt a pang of sadness. *Snowpaw should've been up there with me*, I thought.

I then shook my head quickly. *It shouldn't matter,* I told myself. *We are sisters, and still best friends. That should be enough, and it is enough, for me!*

A loud purr rumbled in my throat as Lilypetal and Thornclaw then approached, both of them flanking me on either side.

Lilypetal dug her muzzle into my cheek. "My kit is a warrior now!" She exclaimed. "How wild is that? Oh, Goldenshine, I am so proud of you."

I tilted my head as I then heard Lilypetal snort, pulling her muzzle away from my cheek. "I have to admit, I do wish that you had chosen a *safer* way to prove yourself," she muttered, her hazel eyes glowing with humor.

"What is the point of being safe?" I questioned my mother teasingly before leaning my head on her shoulder. "You're the one that taught me that taking risks is important, if it means that you are helping those you care about."

Lilypetal then let out a sigh as she stared at me, her gaze full of love. I returned the look before turning my head to look at my father, who was looking back at me, his blue eyes glimmering with affection.

I dug my muzzle into Thornclaw's neck fur. "And you taught me that dealing with challenges or changes is part of what makes a good warrior," I murmured to him, then alternating my gaze between my two parents. "Thank you."

Both Lilypetal and Thornclaw then let out loud purrs, touching their muzzles to my head while Snowpaw watched happily just in front of us.

"Hey, Lilypetal?" I heard Thornclaw meow to my mother.

"Yeah?" Lilypetal responded cheerfully.

"I'd say we did a pretty good job with this one, huh?"

I continued to purr as Lilypetal licked my head. "Oh, yes. I'd definitely say so."

I closed my eyes, letting out a relieved breath as I continued to sit in the ThunderClan clearing, wrapped up in the comfort of my

parents' fur. Snowpaw eventually padded up to join us, worming herself between Lilypetal and I.

It was then that I realized that I had never felt happier. How could I not, with the love and support of my family, and such a great Clan to grow in and be apart of?

*And I am a warrior now,* I said in my mind, almost jumping up in the air again at that thought. *And Great StarClan, I'm going to be a great one at that!*

THE END

# A/N

Hi everyone!

I'm sorry to say that that was the end... again! Thank you so much if you made it to the end of this book. I could not be more thankful of your support!

So, I didn't end on a cliffhanger this time, haha! Buuutttt that doesn't mean that this happy ending is the *end*, because this series has a third book - tt is called Warriors: Shifting Shadows, and I hope that you enjoyed this book enjoy to go and check it out!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- @warriorcatlover345